Send in the Clowns

By: Kallasilya

When Raphael is captured and traded as an animal on the black market, he is forced to question his pride, his strength, and what it really means to be human.

Status: complete

Published: 2008-05-11

Updated: 2009-02-10

Words: 34347

Chapters: 16

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Angst - Characters: Raphael - Reviews: 298 - Favs: 281 - Follows: 96

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4248721/1/Send-in-the-Clowns

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Send in the Clowns

Introduction
Chapter 1
Tyger Tyger Burning Bright
Life on the Black Market
Bought and Sold
Silenced
Freakshow
Like a Light Bulb in a Dark Room
Waking up to Darkness
Sliding Into Apathy
The Carnival is Over
Coming Unravelled
A Different Kind of Cage
Suspension
Retribution
Absolution
Reclamation

Chapter 1

Summary: When Raphael is captured and traded as an animal on the black market, he is forced to question his pride, his strength, and what it really means to be human.

Rating: Mature readers (15+)

This is set after the 2007 film.

My first turtles fanfic! Constructive crit is always very welcome.

Send in the Clowns

Chapter 1

Thunk, thunk. *FWAP* . Thunk.

The comfortingly familiar sounds of Raph in a fight to the death with his punching bag emanated from the dojo. This was one of those instances where the physical exertion didn't seem to be improving his mood.

If I can't beat goddamn Leo *in a spar, at least I can beat the crap out of* this *thing* , he reasoned sourly. Thunk, FWAP. *Maybe I should get a photo of his smug face and stick it up on here. Make me feel better* .

His grumpiness was a mainly habitual response to a bad match. Raph was many things, but graceful in defeat was not one of them. His pride wouldn't allow him to be anything but a sore loser.

After the Winters incident his rivalry had settled back into the familiar groove of (mostly) friendly competition. But every now and then there was a harsher edge to it, something not quite resolved, and tonight was one of those nights.

It had been an ordinary training session after an ordinary day. And it wasn't like Splinter hadn't been pairing him with Leo at all recently. *The problem* , Raph thought darkly, *was the rain* . Something in the way it drove into the pavement so heavily, relentlessly, with a never-ceasing angry hiss. It reminded him…

He'd been going so well with the forgetting, too. He thought that he'd managed to firmly repress the memory of the expression in Leo's eyes with Raph's sai an inch away from his neck.

It was the kinda thing you really only wanted to see once, ya know?

Never seeing it would have been even better, of course, but Raph would settle for *not* re-living the experience every time the sky sprinkled a few drops of liquid. He'd watched Leo as they'd patrolled earlier that evening, but his older brother seemed oblivious. He'd seemed in top form despite the weather, somehow managing to give the impression of leadership without overbearing orders or a superiority complex. The four of them had moved through the city like a well-oiled machine, a flawless team.

But when they'd practiced in the dojo afterwards, Raph had caught some spark in the eyes behind the blue mask that immediately reminded him just how quickly and easily Leo could get under his skin.

And Leo knew it.

It was his damn compulsive memory . That's what he'd blame it on. It had put him off. He'd almost had to force himself *not* to pull his punches. Now *that* was a new experience for him. He'd always been the master of the whole aggression thing. But he was hiding from that memory, and he had a feeling that just laying a punch on Leo would bring the whole thing flooding back. So the fight had ended in exactly the same position as it had on the rooftop that rainy night; only this time, Leo had been the one leaning over his brother sprawled on the floor. There was no bloodlust in his eyes, no hint of vengeance. For a moment his face was completely clear, calm and

focused, just as they always were when he was training. Then something seemed to click – Raph saw the second that he realised – a shadow came over his eyes, and he'd pulled away quickly, with an expression of… guilt? Remorse?

Go figure. Only Leo could somehow manage to feel personally guilty about his own brother almost stabbing him in the throat.

Fwap , FWAP, a grunt of exertion.

"Who's winning?" Don stuck his head through the doorway on his way to the kitchen. Raph growled wordlessly, and he retreated with: "better not be the bag, man…"

Then Leo was in the doorway, and Raph almost wished he could call Don back. Leo had got it into his head recently that just 'cause the two of them were okay now, it was a good idea to have these brotherly, deep and meaningful, heart-to-heart talks. And Raph had never improved much in the communication area.

"Busy, Leo." His older brother rolled his eyes in response.

"C'mon, Raph. You're not even punching it any more, just leaning on it."

Raph straightened self-consciously. "I am not – "

" – Look, about the match - "

"Oh yeah, I *thought* you hadn't gloated quite enough for the evenin' yet."

"No, that's not what I meant! I just wanted to say, to check, that, uh…" Raph watched him floundering, arms folded. "… I mean, well… you know I didn't *mean* anything by it, right?"

Apparently Leo's communication skills weren't too crash-hot at the moment, either. To give the guy some credit, he was struggling to tiptoe around issues that Raph had repeatedly refused to raise with

him, or even acknowledge. *There was* , thought Raph resignedly, *a Serious Discussion waiting to be had there* . And yeah, he knew he couldn't avoid it forever, it needed to happen sometime. But not tonight. Tonight he just wasn't in the mood. *Not that I ever am… whatever* .

Leo was watching him expectantly, looking half-worried. *Oh yeah, need to dodge this one* .

"Lighten up, Leo." Raph managed a smirk. "When am I ever *not* pissed when you win a fight?"

"… Fair point." Leo relaxed enough to smile slightly, but Raph could still see that unspoken conversation just hanging there in his eyes. *Urgh. I hate that look* .

He had a couple of choices here: he could face up to the issue, talk things through with Leo, or he could listen to his pride and… what would Mikey call it? Do a 'Raph'.

Let's see what's behind door number 2.

"Listen, I'm goin' for a run." Already moving to the door, he ignored Leo's unsurprised sigh. "Yeah, yeah, I know, I'm so predictable. I just need to pound some pavement for a while."

Leo arched his brow. "And by pavement, do you mean skulls?"

"No sir. Just don't let 'em get in the way of my trajectory, that's all I'm sayin'."

"Yeah, right." muttered Leo, exasperated and partly amused.

"Back soon," he placated, and tried to sneak out around the back of the couch. Mikey's head popped up.

"Catch a movie with us, Raph! I've got multiple bowls of popcorn…" he waved them enticingly under his brother's nose.

"Nah, I'm headin' out. I give you permission to eat my share."

" *Thankyou* , your Highness!" Mickey bowed reverentially over the bowl, and then stuck his face into it.

"Geez, Mikey, do you have to slobber like that? No one likes soggy popcorn, you know." Don complained.

At the door of the lair Raph stopped to shrug his trenchcoat on over his shoulders, and felt Leo's unmistakable presence dithering behind him. He turned around with a growl stuck in his throat, but held it back when he saw Leo's expression. Instead it came out as a sudden bray of laughter.

"What?!"

"Man, you should see your face! Yer trying *so* hard not to say 'be careful' that yer eyes are practically crossing."

Leo's mouth opened slightly in chagrin, closely followed by embarrassment. He put his hands on his hips.

Raph just walked out, still chuckling. The doors slid closed behind him, and there was a second of silence.

"You're grinning, bro."

"Am not."

"You totally are."

Leo swiped the popcorn bowl, and plunked down on the couch.

Tyger Tyger Burning Bright

A/N: Thanks everyone for your lovely reviews! Just wanted to mention something about my update schedule... I cleverly started writing this fic at the most insanely busy time of year - 21st birthdays, essays due, show seasons to perform - so unfortunately I can't promise really regular updates. Sorry! I'll try my best not to keep anyone waiting for too long between chapters. Chapter 3 at least is already written, so you definitely won't have to wait long for that one. ;)

Without further ado, here's chapter two (the title popped into my head from William Blake's poem, and seemed appropriate).

Chapter 2 - Tyger Tyger Burning Bright.

Now this was an exciting new experience. *It's nice* , Raph reflected *, to go topside for a stroll* without *blowing up at Leo beforehand. Makes a pleasant change from the usual.*

It was a beautiful clear night, no clouds and only the average amount of New York City smog. He'd have to keep his eye on the light of the full moon throwing his silhouette, but other than that he was free to roam. And even though Leo hadn't believed him, he really *wasn't* looking for trouble tonight. For once he felt almost… peaceful. As peaceful as he ever got, anyway. But he wasn't just gonna sit here and stargaze, he wanted some *speed* .

He flew over the rooftops, no particular destination in mind, just enjoying the physical sensations of the wind rushing past his shell and the smooth pull and release of the muscles working under his skin. Even Master Splinter had commented that his ninja skills had improved of late. For the first time he could remember, he was starting to feel truly in control of his body, his breath, his precise movements. Nothing like the control Leo had, of course – not even

on the same level as Don's mental focus or Mikey's incredible acrobatics.

But there was something simple and good in this, in the slap of tough feet against the rough concrete, the defiance of gravity in the leap between two rooftops; a pure, physical exhilaration. He knew he really shouldn't – the way of invisibility, and all – but he was still a teenager as well as a ninja, and he couldn't resist letting out a few whoops and adrenaline-fuelled war cries as he raced over the roofs of the city. *Oh yes. This was his home turf, this place belonged to him* .

He realised he was running out of rooftops when he hit the docks area and saw the water stretching out to the horizon before him, glinting in the moonlight. He settled in the shadow of an industrial smokestack, panting slightly from the light workout, one knee pulled up and the other dangling over the edge of the building.

There was plenty of activity going on around the warehouses and the wharves beneath his feet, but there was nothing unusual in that. It wasn't like this city ever really slept, and activity on the docks ebbed and flowed with the tide. So Raph was contentedly people-watching for quite a few minutes before he was struck by anything odd about the scene.

The thing that probably tipped him off was the sound of an extremely large, extremely angry feline roar.

Um, okay… this may be a concrete jungle, but that sure ain't something ya hear every day.

Raph sat up straighter and focused more intently below him. He could hear men's voices raised now in anxiety. Shouted orders crossed each other in the air, and figures were pointing and running.

In an open space between two warehouses a large wooden crate had just been jerkily unloaded from the back of a truck. Men were scurrying about it frantically, spotlights being swung towards it.

There was another roar, even louder than the first, and suddenly the side of the crate burst open with the snap of splintering wood and an orange-and-black blur streaked out, almost too fast for the human eye to follow. The *human* eye. The thing stopped, momentarily confused or blinded by the loud voices and bright lights.

A fully-grown Bengal tiger was crouched, tail lashing from side to side, on the concrete dock.

And it was *so* not happy.

Raph took half a second to pick his jaw up off the floor and then was immediately on the move, working his way down the side of the building to ground level. Judging by the sounds of panic reaching his ears, the men down there were definitely not equipped to handle this.

Crouching now at the foot of the building, Raph considered with dismay the brilliantly-lit space and the dozen or so spectators. Well, if worst came to worst he could always make a quick exit by diving off the pier – he was sure he could find a sewer pipe in the water down there without too much trouble.

In a split second the decision was made for him: the disoriented tiger picked a target from the crowd of figures milling around it, and charged with a ferocious snarl. A young guy wearing a construction hat and an expression of sheer terror was frozen in its path.

Raph leapt out from the shadows with sai at the ready, and intercepted just in time. He caught the tiger in mid-pounce on his shell, and rolled with it as its weight knocked him to the ground. He found himself in a whirlwind of flashing claws and hissing fangs, and sprung away to give himself some distance. He landed on his feet in a crouch, sai poised defensively. In the momentary pause, as the tiger eyeballed its new adversary, the shouts from the dockworkers began to filter through to his consciousness.

"Jesus!"

"What the hell *is* that thing?!"

And some bonehead: "Oh, I am *so* betting on the tiger!"

Raph growled in irritation. The tiger growled right back.

Then it sprung, and he dodged a powerful blow from its left front paw, all claws extended, closely followed by yellow fangs heading for his neck. He flashed a warning swipe of the sai in front of the creature's face and it flinched backward, retreating a couple of steps.

It was then that Raph noticed it was limping, favouring its front right paw. It had a ring of torn, blood-encrusted flesh around its ankle. It looked like it had spent a lot of time chained up at some point recently.

Now that he was looking at it properly, he could see the creature wasn't in good shape at all. There was a chunk missing from one ear, and its bony ribs could be seen through its mangy, flea-bitten coat. It roared again, and this time Raph heard the pain and the fear in the sound, as well as the anger.

Damn. All of a sudden he felt kinda sorry for it. This thing had not had an easy life.

"Get the boss!" he heard someone yell with a small measure of authority. Spurred into action by the noise, the tiger sprung again. Injuries or no, it was still a formidable predator, and thoughts of pity were quickly driven from Raph's mind as he concentrated on saving his own neck. *Crud, how am I gonna bring this thing down?*

Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. Several men were running out of a side door of the warehouse, each carrying something in his arms…

In the time it took for his gaze to flicker away and back again, the tiger got behind him. Claws raked across the back of his leg. He stifled a sharp cry of pain, and spun instinctively, slicing his sai

across the tiger's good paw. It roared in agony, and Raph sympathised. He felt the same way. If he'd been human his leg would probably have been hamstrung. Luckily, his thick skin afforded him slightly better protection, but it still hurt like hell. He could feel flesh exposed to the raw air.

"Okay, bring it down, now!" yelled a different voice, one that sounded confident of being obeyed. Raph saw the men closing in on the spotlit area in a wide circle, raising weapons. *Guns?*

No, there were no explosive cracks of gunshots. Darts flew out of the weapons instead, and a few found their mark in the tiger's flank.

Raph lowered his sai a fraction in relief. *Tranquillisers. These guys have finally got their act together. Took 'em bloody long enough* . He tried to catch his breath. The tiger was swaying on its feet, its eyes growing dull.

"Get the other thing, too!"

… *Wait. What?*

"I don't give a fuck *what* it is, I said take it DOWN!"

No way. Those ungrateful little bastards. Raph's feet remained rooted to the concrete for a precious few seconds as he mentally processed his shock and indignation.

Then he did what any smart turtle would do when surrounded by a ring of trigger-happy idiots with dart guns.

He ran for it.

Aiming for the pier, he hadn't gone three steps before he'd already realised he wasn't going to make it. His injured leg had burst into flames, at least that's what it felt like. It slowed him down, and when he felt the first dart in his shoulder he knew he was done, but he kept

charging head-down towards the distant promise of the water, feeling the blood spattering from the back of his leg.

He could hear darts rebounding off the back of his shell and whistling past his head; the air was thick with them. His vision was already blurring, but for one wild second he thought he would almost make it through to the pier…

Then a couple more darts joined the one in his shoulder in quick succession, and suddenly the muscles in his legs wouldn't obey his commands any more. He sunk down in a rubbery heap on the cold, grimy concrete, just outside the circle of spotlights. *Stupid stupid stupid* , he berated himself groggily.

A pair of booted feet seemed to wobble in front of his eyes. He felt one boot nudge against his shell, tipping him over on to his back. A dark figure stood above him, but his vision refused to focus. People were talking, exclaiming, yelling.

This… no… he couldn't…

Everything slid away.

Life on the Black Market

A/n: My chapters seem to be getting longer! I'll try and get on to chapter 4 as soon as possible. That's all from me, enjoy! We're just about to find out what Raph's got himself into this time...

Edit - sorry if this is Alert-spamming people, but the stupid document keeps changing format after I've saved it. *Sigh* . Let's see if this one works.

Chapter 3 – Life on the Black Market

Mikey was sprawled out on the couch, his plastron dappled with bits of popcorn, snoring. Leo was sitting cross-legged on the single seater, his eyes fixed intently on the TV screen.

Don wandered out of his lab and looked between Leo's unblinking gaze and the blank, powerless screen.

"Uh… so I guess Raph's not back yet."

Leo didn't even bother confirming. "For some reason when he said he wouldn't be back late, I thought he really meant it this time."

Don could hear the hurt masked by disappointment in his brother's voice. "Even if it's Raph on his best behaviour, he's still *Raph* ." he offered as an explanation. Leo hummed, not convinced. "Maybe he dropped by April and Casey's and they got stuck into a few beers?"

Leo looked up at this, and the shadow of a smirk crossed his face. "Didn't Raph tell you what happened the last time he paid an unexpected to April and Casey's?"

"Uh… no?"

"Let's just say, he should have called first."

"Oh."

"And April and Casey should maybe close their windows occasionally."

"… Oh."

A slight pause. Leo cleared his throat. "I'd call now to check, but I really don't want to disturb them this late…" *If he is there, then he's fine* , he told himself, *and if he's not… well, there's nothing those two will be able to tell me* .

"Just call his shell cell, Leo. Geez, you two are like a couple after their first date. No one ever wants to be the first to call."

"But you know how he gets when I call him up all the time."

"He'll get over it."

Leo sighed. A minute later, he'd followed the ringing sound to Raph's room, where the cell sat buzzing on the bedside table. Of course – he hadn't had the cell on him in the dojo and he'd gone straight out. Either Raph had just plain forgotten to take it, or he deliberately didn't want to be contacted.

Leo really hoped it was the former. He didn't think his brother had been that annoyed when he'd left hours earlier. *But maybe he was. Maybe he thought by finishing that fight the way I did I was trying to prove a point, rub it in his face, or something.* Leo had already forgiven him for that night on the rooftop, but he had a sneaking suspicion that Raph hadn't quite forgiven *himself* , yet. And Leo was smart enough to recognise that a lot of the time, Raph's apparent anger at the world was just a displacement of anger at himself.

Plus, Raph had that almost supernatural capacity for getting himself into trouble.

With a long-suffering sigh, Leo dialled April's number.

When Raph swam back to consciousness, the world was pitch black. No, wait… his eyes were still closed. The thought of opening them was too difficult, let alone moving his limbs. His stomach felt queasy and strange. The floor he was lying on was gritty. He could smell an unpleasant mix of fuel and fish, so he guessed he was still somewhere in the docks area, but he could also smell mouldy straw and… *animals* . It wasn't a healthy scent. The air was filled with rustling and twittering, scratching and rumbling.

Where the shell am I?

After a few minutes he managed to force his eyes open. There was light in here, after all, but not much. It was dim and grey and filtered into the room through small grates near the top of one wall. From the quality of the light he guessed it must be near-dawn, though there was no way to tell for sure.

He was lying on his side, and there were thick iron bars not half a metre in front of his face. *Great* .

Raph *really* didn't like cages. He even had the slight suspicion that some of Casey's claustrophobia might have rubbed off on him. Just being cooped up in the lair for too long gave him the heeby-jeebies. Grunting, he tried to raise himself up to his knees. As soon as he attempted to move he realised that his hands were chained together behind his back – *that would explain the aching shoulders* – and his stomach roiled with nausea. He let out a groan, and fell back to his original position with a slight thump.

Well. This sucks .

Maybe he'd just lie there and look around for a while. The chains felt heavy, and the bars looked solid; he wasn't going anywhere just yet.

His cage was raised off the floor slightly, and pathetically small in size; if he was free and standing he'd easily be able to grasp the bars on either side with outstretched arms, and the roof wouldn't be too far over his head. He was in a depressing, high-ceilinged space

with walls lined by boxes, crates and cages, many of which were occupied by rare, exotic or downright bizarre creatures. Stuffed animals and hunting trophies – heads and skins and furs – also dotted the walls.

In the middle of the room, from a cage only slightly larger than his own, the tiger was watching him with glinting eyes, unmoving.

Long minutes dragged by as the light trickling through the grates gradually became brighter. Just to have something to do, Raph slowly worked his way up on to his knees. His sai were gone, unsurprisingly. The nausea in his gut was beginning to recede, but now he was reminded of the injury to the back of his calf. Craning his head over his shoulder, he could see the dried blood caked on to the limb. It felt okay. Well, not entirely true. It'd hurt like a bitch with too much movement, but it wasn't like his leg was about to drop off.

It wasn't until a couple of hours later that anything in the room changed. There was a *click* and the room flooded instantly with harsh fluorescent light. Raph squinted for a second, and one of the birds in the cages uttered a shrill cry.

Two sets of footsteps echoed through the open space, and Raph snapped his eyes open again. One of the men was wearing a suit; the other was dressed as a labourer, and was carrying a clipboard where he was noting down the businessman's instructions.

"… and Mr. Darmonaz will be here around ten thirty, so I want everything to be prepared and on display by then. He's one of our best customers. He's taking the tiger, but I'm sure he'll be *very* interested in the thing we picked up last night, as well."

They came closer to Raph's cage, and not wanting to be on his knees before them, he used his chained hands to grip the bars behind him and pulled himself awkwardly to his feet.

The man with the clipboard stopped a few metres away and stared. Suit-Man looked smug.

"In all my years in the trade, I've never seen anything like it before. Darmonaz won't be able to resist." Raph could practically see the dollar signs shining in his eyes.

The other guy was still staring, and Raph rapidly lost his patience.

"What? You never seen a giant walking turtle before?" The man's eyes bugged out of his head slightly, and this time even Suit-Man looked shocked.

"… It can *talk* ?!"

"Damn straight, I can talk. Now would ya mind telling me why you shoved me in this little birdcage after I just saved yer sorry asses from tigger over there?" he jerked his head towards the tiger's cage.

Raph's temper came rapidly to the boil as the two men gaped at him some more.

Eventually the worker turned to Suit-Man and said in a shaking voice, "Well. This complicates things."

"This changes nothing," said the other, visibly pulling himself together. "I don't care how talkative or how *rude* this thing is. It's going to make me a fortune."

"Piss off," Raph snorted. "Yer not gonna be making any money outta *me* , I guarantee you. What, ya think you can sell me off for hard labour and no one will notice I've got a shell and three fingers? Come off it, pal."

Suit-Man looked him in the eyes for the first time.

"Labour?" He laughed. "A curiosity like you?" he chuckled some more, but didn't elaborate. "Never mind," he said to his lackey, "I'll discuss the problem with Darmonaz if it arises. Once he's bought the product it's up to him how he deals with it."

"The *product* ? Hello? How about showing some freakin' *gratitude* ." The men ignored him, moving back towards the doorway they had entered through.

"Hey! Dickhead! This ' *product* ' is talkin' to ya. Are ya goddamn deaf? *Don't you walk away from me* !" He kicked out at the bars in frustration with his good leg, and was momentarily rewarded when the loud clanging noise caused the men to pause in their steps. But they did not turn to face his cage.

"The thing has spirit," one commented neutrally.

"Yes," said Suit-Man with satisfaction. "It will make for good sport."

A stream of blistering curses followed them out the door.

Raph seethed, trying to ignore his throbbing foot. How *dare* they. When he got out of here he'd wring their scrawny little necks and put out the coldly calculating light in their eyes for good.

"I am *not* a commodity." His voice was loud in the echoing room. The tiger blinked back at him with bleary eyes. He started jerking at the chains around his wrists, anger making him desperate for freedom of movement. *Damn it, if I could just* punch *something* . The metal cuffs merely dug deeper into his skin, and didn't budge. *Grr* . He needed *out* . Right now.

He threw his shell against the thick bars with resounding force, and yelled insults at the walls until his voice was rough in his throat.

But the cage was unmoving, the chains were infuriatingly tight, and the animals in the other enclosures just watched him with incurious eyes until he finally wore himself out, and slumped back down to his knees.

Bought and Sold

A/n: Not much to say here, actually. Except I really hate writing dialect. Also, have I mentioned recently that I love reviews...? :D

Chapter 4 – Bought and Sold

...

Time passed indistinguishably. The morning wore on. Raph wished there was a clock on the wall. He wished *something* would happen, even though he suspected it wouldn't be anything good. He hated just sitting there, waiting. So this time when the doors slid open he was ready, and standing on his feet almost before the men had stepped into the room.

Suit-Man was back, this time with the unmistakable aura of the salesman, a slick presenter of goods. The man who followed him into the warehouse was short, and wrapped in a long dark coat. Something about the way he walked, his proprietary gaze, suggested to Raph that he was familiar with this building. *This must be Mr. Darmonaz* . Suit-Man led him over to the tiger's cage.

"Here's the beast you requested. We had it shipped over especially for you." Darmonaz stepped forward and examined it critically, eyeing its damaged paws and its sorry state.

"Poor condition," he murmured analytically. "Was this the best you could do?"

"Well, my friend," Suit-Man smoothly ushered Darmonaz in the direction of Raph's cage, "we ran into some slight problems while receiving the delivery last night, but I'm sure you'll see how events have worked to your advantage. This," he gestured towards the

glaring turtle, "is the creature that attacked and injured your tiger specimen."

"Bullshit," said Raph bluntly. Darmonaz gaped at him, and Raph smirked at receiving that reaction yet again. "Tigger was already banged-up when he got here. This guy is tryin' ta rip you off." *How he wished he could cross his arms right now* .

The businessman glared at him furiously, but Darmonaz didn't seem to notice. He gazed at Raph with the same critical detachment as he had for the tiger, examining every inch of him with fascination. Raph's reptilian blood ran cold as he began to circle the cage slowly.

"This one is damaged, too." His voice held disapproval at the sight of the torn flesh on Raph's leg.

"Yeah," growled the turtle before Suit-Man could speak, "apparently that's the thanks ya get around here fer doin' someone a favour."

"It's magnificent," Darmonaz pronounced, as if Raph hadn't even spoken. "How much?" The businessman's eyes gleamed.

Raph twisted with familiar frustration. This often happened with humans. They were so fixated on the fact that he could speak, they never even heard anything that he said. For all the attention they paid to the meaning of his words, he may as well have been speaking Japanese.

"The price is steep for a unique specimen such as this. The shell alone would fetch a hefty sum on the collector's market. Add to that the fact that it appears semi-intelligent – "

" – *semi* -intelligent?!"

" – and its strongly aggressive nature – "

"Its intelligence is irrelevant," said Darmonaz dismissively. "It could even prove problematic, in fact. My audiences could suspect a

cheap trick, a costume – it could drive them away. They don't want to be *spoken* to. They don't want *humanity* . No, what fascinates me about this freak are the ways in which it's *in* human."

"More human than *you* , asshole." Again, that blank look in the eyes suggesting selective deafness.

"It's talkativeness could be… rectified, I'm sure."

"Indeed. Though for the trouble, you will have to lower your price."

And so they began to haggle. Right there in front of his face. For a second he was almost chuffed at the sums of money they were mentioning. Then he was overcome by a wave of outrage, closely followed by a paralysing helplessness. These two men were standing there, bartering his life away like he was an animal, and he was completely damn powerless to stop it.

Caged and chained , he thought with a growing horror. *Caged and chained* . What could he say? What could he say to make them listen? There was nothing. But he refused to be silent.

"Hey, come on. Surely I'm worth more than that. One of a kind, an' all." One of a quartet, actually, but he wasn't gonna let *them* know that. "Yo, boneheads. Ya don't know what yer messin' with." Their discussion faltered, and Raph turned up the volume another notch. "Trust me on this one. If ya can't even handle my friend tigger, ya got no chance with *me* ."

Suit-Man grimaced. "Shall we finalise the sale in the peace and comfort of my office?"

"Indeed." They headed for the exit. "I'd like to contact my vet before we finish to discuss what to do about the noise problem – I don't think a conventional muzzle would work over the strangely shaped beak…"

"Yer *mum's* got a strangely shaped beak!" Raph bellowed after them as the door closed and their voices dwindled away. "What, you afraid of a little conversation? Wimps." He muttered under his breath.

See, Leo , he thought to himself. *I can be talkative when I want ta be. Some people jus' don't appreciate my sparkling wit and my way with words* .

… *Leo* . He sighed. Leo would probably already be angsting and worrying and fearing the worst, going over all the worst case scenarios in his head. *Don't worry* , he wished he could tell his brother, *M'fine, I've been stuck in much worse situations than this before. I'll be alright, I'll be home soon* .

Practically, he had no idea how he was going to manage that. But it was just a bunch of good-fer-nothin' greedy crims, right? How hard could it be?

He got a hint of the answer when they came for him that afternoon. Lots of them this time. They looked to be from the same mould as the goons on the dock last night, but these ones didn't have dart guns.

They had tasers. About half a dozen of them. And a dozen more bulky men stood around, ready to add their muscles to the mix.

"We'll get this one first." It was the worker from this morning, and he was indicating towards Raph's cage. "Bring the crate over." Apparently he was some kind of overseer, as the men scurried to do his bidding. One of them powered up a small forklift vehicle, and used it to drag an empty crate from the wall towards the centre of the warehouse.

Raph tensed. This would be his only chance, when they tried to transfer him between the cage and the crate. The door would be open, and he'd have maybe a few seconds to bust his way out.

Surrounded by twenty men and with his hands still chained behind his back. *Sure. Easy, right?*

"Okay, Joey. How 'bout you give the turtle a little buzz so he knows what he's dealing with?" One of the men with tasers approached the bars, and Raph's mind worked furiously. *I've gotta let them underestimate me, make 'em think I really am just a dumb animal. Then when the door's open…*

So even though it went against all his instincts, he forced himself to stand motionless as the tip of the taser came through the bars. He tensed and didn't allow himself to cry out as it connected with the centre of his plastron. Fire flooded through him, his nerve endings burned and writhed, but as soon as it started it was over and he gulped in deep breaths, trying not to shake, willing his legs to support him. He twisted his wrists subconsciously against the chains.

"The fuck was that for?" he swore at them when he could speak again. He didn't get any of the customary looks of shock, so these guys must already have been informed of his 'noise problem'. They just watched him cautiously.

"That, turtle, was merely to demonstrate the consequences of non-cooperation. Now when we open the door you're going to hop straight in the crate like an obedient little freak, right? And things will go easier for all of us."

"Uh… yeah. Right." Raph tried in vain to hide the incredulity in his voice. *This guy really believes it's gonna be that easy?* "Ya coulda just said 'please'." The overseer looked puzzled.

"Didn't think animals answered to 'please'."

"Yeah? Well maybe you should have a good hard think about that. Before ya stick me in a crate."

He was ignoring him again. Men swarmed like insects. The side of the crate facing his cage came open. Its interior was even smaller

and more cramped than the cage itself. *I am* not *going in there* . A man came forward slowly and began to unlock the padlock and chains around the cage door. Men with tasers moved into position on either side.

The door swung open. Raph stood docilely, with his head down.

"Easy," murmured the overseer, as if to a spooked animal, "easy now…"

Tasers moved slowly towards him from the back of the cage, and he let them shepherd him out until he was in the open, surrounded by men with weapons. The crate was no more than two steps away.

He jumped. Kicked. Two men went down immediately. God, just for those few seconds, it felt so good to *move* . But it was hard to balance his landing and pivot with his arms chained back. He knocked one more guy to the ground before the first taser got him in the side, a higher setting this time, and he was on his knees. The pressure didn't release.

Yelling. *They were all over him, it hurt, oh fuck, it* ***hurt*** , and he couldn't stop himself crying out.

There was a circle of them around him where he was curled on the floor, and they didn't let up. He couldn't hold on to consciousness any longer.

The men dragged his twitching body into the crate, and sealed it shut.

"Now the tiger." The work went on.

Silenced

A/n: ... And here's where the story begins to earn its M rating. I got a bit carried away with the chapter length in this one - couldn't find a good place to stop, so you get an extra long chapter. Lucky you!

Thanks to everyone for the reviews. They're such a great kick of inspiration! :D

Chapter 5 - Silenced

He dreamed he was in a tiny dark space. It was stuffy, pressing in on him from all sides. The air was stale. There was bumpy movement, noises. Then the movement stopped. After a few minutes there was air, light. People were dragging him. Voices he didn't understand. The rattle of chains, the clang of metal.

When he woke from the strange half-dream an indeterminate time later, he found himself caged again. This time there was an additional chain between his ankles. It wouldn't allow his legs to stretch any further than a shoulder-width apart. *Crud* . He groaned. He wouldn't be catching them off their guard again. *He was slowly losing control of all his limbs* . He tried to hold on to his anger, grimly. When he was pissed off it was easier to ignore the slow panic building in his chest.

He felt like crap. His injured leg had begun to burn again. *And geez, he could really use the bathroom right about now* .

Once he'd groggily taken stock of his general discomfort, he realised that there were two figures in front of his cage, talking. There was movement in the background; men unloading from the back of a truck. More animals. There were no windows. He felt like he was

underground. His mind was scattered, but he tried to focus on what the two figures were saying.

One was Darmonaz. The other was a woman with frizzy brown hair, pulled back into a ponytail. Her eyes were curious behind thin-rimmed glasses, and she wore a white coat.

"… really must improve the transportation of their livestock," Darmonaz was muttering to her. "At least the tiger fared slightly better. But this beast is unique. Now you've seen it for yourself, I was hoping you could give some suggestions on how to keep it, doctor. And how to keep it *silent* ."

"Hmm," the doctor tapped her chin thoughtfully, examining Raph where he lay on the floor of the cage. "I'd agree with your assessment on the muzzle. And you say you don't want any permanent damage?" Darmonaz nodded confirmation. "So we can't simply cut out the tongue…"

"Gee, thanks," Raph rasped as loudly as he could manage.

"Ahh," the doctor breathed, bending closer to the bars, "fascinating. It may have been trained to speak… like a large reptilian parrot, if you will…"

Darmonaz looked bored. "As long as there's a way to shut it up, then I want it ready for display tomorrow night."

The doctor frowned. "That doesn't give me much time to work on it."

"Then I suggest you get started. I'm sure it's going to be one of our main attractions."

"I'm *not* an 'it'." Raph interjected venomously, raising himself unsteadily to his knees. "My *name* is Raphael."

"Not for long, turtle." Darmonaz gave him the cool smile of ownership. "We'll come up with a more suitable label, I think." He

moved off, and the doctor followed him.

Raph resisted the powerful urge to lean his head against the bars. *Damnit. Leo or Donnie would know what to do here. Heck, even Mikey would just have to flash those baby-blue eyes of his and they'd apologise, let him out and give him flowers and chocolates. What am* I *supposed to do? What am I supposed to* **do** *?*

At least he was being left alone for the moment. This place was much smaller and more cramped than the warehouse he'd been held in before. The truck had just finished being unloaded. Now its back doors were closed and secured, and it rumbled out a concrete driveway. Heavy double doors slid closed behind it.

One wall was stacked with small cages, each of which contained a very aggressive-looking dog. Sporadic barks echoed around the brick room. Other small cages held fighting cockerels, and there was one containing a bedraggled bald eagle. Larger animals, including Raph, were held towards the centre of the room. The tiger was there, trying to pace restlessly about the cage but effectively chasing its tail in the tiny space. Raph envied it; at least its chains had been removed. There was also a black bear, and a wild cat which, on closer inspection, appeared to have an extra limb growing from its side. The cage floors were littered with mouldy-looking straw and sawdust. It didn't take a genius to sense the misery in the air. This wasn't your regular, sanitised, family-friendly zoo.

But they *had* left him a bucket of water in the corner of his tiny cage. He shuffled over to it on his knees, suddenly realising how parched he was. He had to dip his face in to drink. The water didn't taste that clean, but at least it was cool and soothing. He slurped away at it awkwardly until the bucket was half empty.

"So this is the boss' latest and greatest catch. The famous talking turtle." A brash voice interrupted him. He raised his face from the water. The man who had spoken had drawn the attention of most of the other workers in the room, and he knew it. His chest swelled out.

"Looks just like another stupid animal to me, dribbling all over itself." Someone chuckled.

"Ya got a better suggestion, sparky?"

"Ohh, he thinks he's Mr. Wise Guy too, huh?" Raph drew himself to his feet, stumbling slightly against his new ankle chains.

"Given the competition, I'd say it's a pretty safe assumption." He bristled.

There was a bray of laughter from a young man in a dirty white singlet. "Hey Max, the turtle thinks he's faster 'n you!" The other men snickered quietly. Max turned an angry shade of red.

"He'll learn his place… stupid *freak* ." He spat and it hit the centre of Raph's plastron, and began dribbling down. *Gross* , Raph grimaced, wishing he had his hands free so he could wipe it away.

Max seemed to feel that the status quo had been restored, for he abruptly lost interest.

"C'mon boys, let's get back to work." They drifted back to their tasks; feeding the animals, shovelling sawdust, changing water. Raph's stomach was growling at him, but he refused to ask for food. He doubted there'd be much point, anyway.

After a while the men left, shutting down the lights after them. With no natural light filtering in, the room was pitch-black. Was it night time? Raph had already almost lost track of what day it was, let alone what time. The animals seemed to settle down in the darkness.

Why does being trapped have to be so boring? He ached all over, and his leg still burned, but he wasn't tired. So he leaned his shell against one corner of the cage, closed his eyes, and attempted something he'd never been any good at.

He knew both Master Splinter and Leonardo were meditation experts. They could contact each other's minds like a dial-in telephone service, or so it seemed. Even Raph himself had managed it, once, with his brothers' help. They'd reached their Sensei when he was being held by the Shredder. But Raph had never achieved it on his own before. He'd never really understood how it worked. Most of the time, he preferred to communicate with his fists.

He tried to focus on his breathing. The backs of his eyelids were blank. *Master Splinter. Leo. Anyone… Uh, I could really use some help right about now. I'm kinda stuck.*

… Nothing. His mind was silent. He felt stupid. *I never could pull off that damn trick* . Feeling around behind his back, he pulled at the bars of the cage a few times experimentally, hoping for a rusted section or a bit of luck. Nope, nothing was budging. *If only I could slip outta my shell* , he thought sourly. If it were possible to do so, he might have just squeezed through the bars.

With nothing else to do, he curled up in the scruffy straw – the cage was too small to allow him to stretch out full length – and tried to sleep.

The lights flooding on brought him instantly awake and alert. The doctor and two men had entered the room. Even before he could get to his feet there was a dart in his arm, and his brain went half back to sleep again.

"S'like… freakin' déjà vu, or somethin'," he slurred out loud.

It took a while for him to register that the cage was open and the two men between them were half-carrying him, half-dragging him to a side door where the doctor waited. He needed to run. Running would be a good idea. Why couldn't he get his feet under him?

Through the door everything was white plastic and metallic surfaces. Instruments were laid out. Somehow he was on a table, and the cold of it on his skin sharpened his mind just enough to prompt some weak resistance. His chains were gone, but he blinked – a long, slow blink – and found himself cuffed to the table. The doctor pulled a spotlight over him.

"Wait," he tried to say, "no, wait." But the mask was coming down over his face, he had to breathe, they were putting stuff into his lungs.

Numbness. White.

When he awoke again it was a much slower and more painful process. Consciousness came in stages. He felt like he'd been out for a while. He forced his eyes to crack open. Back in the main room, in his cage. It was busy again, there were people milling around. The light made his head hurt. Shoulders ached in relief because his hands had been re-chained in front of him this time, for some reason. There was noise. *What …?*

Confusion. God knew how many and what kind of drugs were still floating around in his system. He was pretty sure his vision wasn't usually this fuzzy, and his limbs didn't usually tingle and prickle like that. His stomach was empty and acidic.

Hang on. The human voices nearest to him sounded kinda panicked. *Focus* , he begged his sense of hearing.

"I thought you said it'd be awake by now!"

"Well, it should be! I calculated the dose in ratio to its body weight. It should be fine. There must have been residual traces in its bloodstream from its earlier handling by those idiots at the supply end."

"Boss is gonna be pissed. Should I tase it? Might wake it up a little."

"No, you idiot! You'd be more likely to knock it out again." It was the doctor, and she sounded exasperated.

Raph decided he'd had quite enough electrical shocks in the past couple of days to last a lifetime.

"Don't get your panties in a twist," he tried to say, "I'm awake."

But nothing happened It… there was something wrong. His face hurt. He couldn't… He tried to suck in a deep breath, and found he couldn't get his mouth to open. *Up* , he told himself frantically, *get up, find out what the shell is going on* .

It took him much too long to get to his feet. He tried to raise his hands to touch his face, searching for the source of the stinging pain, but found his cuffs were connected to an iron ring on the floor by another length of chain. His movement was jerked to a stop; he couldn't raise his hands above his waist. And his ankles were still hobbled.

"…Finally," the doctor was saying.

"No time for your check-up, Doc." It was Max, full of his own self-importance. "Doors open in just two minutes, and it's got to be out there in the display room when the crowd comes in."

"Get moving, then. We'll just have to hope the stitching holds."

Stitching? he thought with a growing sense of foreboding. With a concentrated effort he managed to focus his eyes downward (though it made him dizzy), and at the edge of his vision he could just see something black and wiry. *No. Oh,* ***hell*** *no* . He tried to open his jaws again and felt something *pull* horribly in his flesh. The pain was instantaneous, but his shocked cry was trapped behind closed lips and emerged only as a low groan in his throat, which he immediately hated himself for. It was a pitiful, disgusting noise.

They'd sewn his mouth shut.

His breathing was becoming quick and shallow. His nostrils flared, working overtime to draw in enough oxygen to satisfy his thudding heart. He knew he had to calm down, steady his breathing. He was already light-headed enough from whatever anaesthetic they'd put him under.

But just as he began to get himself under control, the cage moved with a jolt. Four men were wheeling it out through the double doors. He tried to throw out one leg to regain his balance, but the ankle chain jerked him short. He tipped sideways and his shoulder hit the bars painfully.

"Goddamn chains," he growled without thinking. But the sound that came from behind his closed lips was nothing like words. It was an animal noise of rage and fear, unintelligible. The men wheeling his cage paid him no attention. Out the double doors, they moved a short way along a dreary concrete service passage before entering another room.

This place was made for presentation. The floor was still concrete, but the walls were panelled in gleaming wood. It was open plan, with a slightly raised platform at one end. The men wheeled Raph's cage up the ramp on to the platform, and left him there. Raph worked on getting his breathing back under control as he peered out between the bars.

The dog cages had been moved around a fenced circle that had been set up near the centre of the room, sand covering the floor inside the ring. There were displays on the walls, and tables holding the bodies of strange, deformed creatures in glass preservation jars. Other cages were dotted around the room, each labelled with a sign on a stand nearby. The animals inside looked restless. The tiger was trying to prowl again. Raph was jerked out of his own predicament just long enough to feel a little bit of guilt. *If it wasn't for me, Tigger might have been outta here by now. If I'd known* this *was where we'd end up, I woulda just let him eat that stupid guy* .

His thoughts were interrupted as Darmonaz strode into the room. Just the sight of the man made Raph long to cause some damage to something.

"Is everything ready? Good. It's time to open. Clear out all the men who aren't needed on the betting tables." He gave orders as he carried a display sign over to the platform where Raph's cage rested, about a metre above floor level. He smiled at Raph coldly when he caught sight of the doctor's needlework.

"Perfect. You look just as ferocious as I'd hoped. My audience is going to *love* hating you."

Raph burned with the need to retaliate. He made the only noise he could, smashing the metallic cuffs around his wrists against the bars of the cage. He glared straight into the man's eyes.

Darmonaz looked back unflinchingly. He was really looking at him this time, and the lack of hesitation or self-doubt in his expression was crushing. This man *knew* , Raph thought suddenly, he *knew* that his most recent acquisition wasn't just another mere animal. He knew Raph was sentient, and at least intelligent enough to understand what was being done to him. He knew *exactly* what he was doing. *He just didn't give a damn* .

That shook Raph more than he'd admit, even to himself.

"Alright," announced Darmonaz loudly. "Everything's set. Open the doors."

Freakshow

A/n: I had a review after the last chapter suggesting that I could possibly put my rating down a little. Let me know what you think after this one.

(My logic is that, if anyone made a movie of this story, it would definitely be M-rated. Then again, movies are rated differently to written work. Not to mention the fact that some films receive different rating in Australia than they do in the U.S. It's all very confusing).

TMNT has taken over my brain. I'm meant to be writing my essays, but... can't... stop... reading... fanfic. Argh.

Chapter 6 – Freakshow

As people came flooding into the 'display room', someone arced up the spotlights around the base of Raph's cage. He squinted his eyes against the glare. He was dizzy, sick, hungry. What's more, as the inquisitive faces of the crowd began to move through the room, gradually approaching his platform at the back, his instincts were screaming at him to run, hide. The lights were so bright. He would be *seen* . *Master Splinter is going to kill me* , he thought fuzzily. *He always said we had to hide away, people couldn't know about us. What if they go looking for my brothers? No… what if…*

"Don't let yourself panic." Leo's calm voice said to him as clearly as if he were standing right behind him. *Leo?* No, Leo wasn't here. Raph didn't even know where 'here' was. He didn't even know for sure if he was still in the city. In any case, he took his brother's advice. No one was going to go looking for the lair or hunting his family. No one even knew they existed. They were safe.

They were safe , he repeated in his mind. Over and over, like a mantra. It helped to keep his breathing steady. No matter what was happening to him, as long as his brothers were safe, then he could handle it. He could get through it.

"Think it through," Don's voice floated into his mind. "Plan as much as you can."

I was never so great at that side of it, Donny.

There was no answer. Man, now he'd starting *talking* to the voices in his head. Great. He'd gotta stop them pumping him full of drugs or he'd be permanently whacked.

"Already are, bro."

Thanks for that, Mikey.

"Whoa. What the hell is that?" This voice was all too real, and up close. Real close. Raph realised dimly that he must be pretty badly shaken up if he didn't hear a huge galumphing guy like *this* one approaching. He looked like Hun's long-lost cousin. Okay, maybe not quite that big, but on a similar scale. Similar scale of ugly, too. There was a group of men with him, and they all stared up at Raph's cage in fascination. They had cold beers in hand. *Huh. So this place covers catering, too. Now all they needed was popcorn, and peanuts to feed the elephants. Wait, this place didn't have elephants. Only Tigger, and Raph was pretty sure tigers didn't eat peanuts…*

Oh, Christ. He was gagged and bound hand and foot, locked in a cage, surrounded by dozens of onlookers, and he was loopy to boot. *This is just wonderful* .

The group of men stared up at him. The big one ambled over to read the sign that Darmonaz had left at the front of the platform. The babble of voices rose steadily.

Raph hated the way they all looked at him. There was nowhere to hide. The platform was detached from the wall, so as the audience around him grew, people pushed through to surround him on all four sides. The women pointed at him with wide, horrified eyes, while the men scowled and made gruff comments. If anyone read the sign then they looked up at him with even more hatred and disgust in their eyes. He was beginning to wonder what it said about him. *Probably better not to know* .

Unfortunately his ignorance wouldn't last very long.

Snarls and pained yelps were coming from inside the ring where the dogfights were going on. The crowd jostled around it, placing bets, vying for a better view of the carnage, yelling in either victory or defeat. Raph could hear the bear growling as some young punks threw something at its cage. One of Darmonaz's supervisors stood nearby, just smirking and watching. Music had started up, blaring into the room from speakers at the corners of the ceiling. The thudding beat rapidly intensified Raph's headache.

The current dogfight ended, and more of the crowd pooled around Raph's cage. He could sense the aggressive vibe in the air. He was no stranger to aggression himself, but this felt different. This was angry, vicious. When he saw Darmonaz's oily smile making its way towards him, he knew whatever happened next was not going to be pretty.

Darmonaz jumped up on to the small platform to address his audience, his voice taking on a deep, oratorical tone.

"My men have gone to great lengths to capture this, our newest specimen. We searched long and hard, tracked it for many days, before it was finally captured and taken here, where it can no longer cause harm to the citizens of this city."

That wasn't right , Raph's brain told him sluggishly. *They weren't looking for me, I took 'em by surprise…*

"For years this menace has been allowed to stalk the streets, terrorising our women, taking our children…"

Now wait just a second…

Darmonaz was controlling the rumbling crowd with the skill of a conductor bringing an orchestra to crescendo. "So we have taken the beast away from its prey. As you can see," he shot a malicious glance over his shoulder at Raph, "we have made sure that it will never again feast on human flesh."

Oxygen given to the flame, and the crowd roared. Raph battled the hysterical urge to laugh. This was too far, too much.

"Monster!"

"… Disgusting…"

"… Evil freak!"

An empty soda can clanged against the bars.

Darmonaz caught the eye of one of his men standing at the edge of the crowd. Some signal seemed to pass between them, and the man disappeared through the door where Raph had been brought in.

By this time, almost everyone in the basement room had been attracted by the noise and activity going on at the one end. They were fresh from animal fights, faces flushed from a few too many beers, egged on by testosterone-pumped friends and admiring girlfriends.

Raph couldn't say a word in his own defense. And he *knew* that even if he could open his mouth and point out he didn't exactly make a habit of devouring small children, they wouldn't listen. But never before had he longed so much to speak up. He couldn't stop himself from trying, and his stomach turned as the repulsive black wire held fast, his face stinging.

"Imagine, if you will, coming across this monster in a dark alleyway late at night. Or perhaps finding it creeping in through an open window of your apartment, leaning over the cradle of your child…" There was a half-strangled scream from the audience.

"But no more. *No more!* Its fangs will no longer taste our blood!" There was a roar in a single voice from many throats, a voice of fear disguised as irrational hatred. And the voice was clamouring for punishment.

A beer bottle smashed against his cage. The dregs splattered over him as he stumbled back reflexively. Broken glass glittered amid the sawdust on the cage floor.

Jesus Christ . They were bloodthirsty now, stir-crazy. There were fists in the air. Darmonaz was speaking again but Raph didn't bother listening. *Jesus Christ* , he thought again. *This can't be how it ends. Torn apart by a crowd out for vengeance for invented crimes, violence against anything different from the norm…*

I never got ta have that talk with Leo, he thought frantically. *I never got ta tell him and now they've taken my fuckin'* ***voice*** *…*

The man who Darmonaz had signalled to pushed through the crowd to the side of his boss, handing him something. Suddenly there was a taser coming through the bars, and there was nowhere for Raph to go. He couldn't even yell, and the anger and the frustration were internalised along with the pain.

… They were cheering. They were fucking *cheering* . It was at that point that he might have gone slightly into shock. There was nothing more he could do; no actions left, only reactions. The pain lifted for a few disorienting seconds, and then returned afresh. Again and again. It didn't end. The evil black stick just kept coming back, and there was laughter. It felt like it went on for hours, but it was probably only minutes. This was the finale, *he* was the finale, the fireworks at the end of the show.

He twisted and turned, tangling the chains around himself, trying somehow to get away, or fight back, but the faces leered all around him like some sort of nightmare…

There was a pause.

Darmonaz had instructed some of his men to wheel the cage offstage. Raph sagged against the bars, his chest heaving. *It's over* . Aftershocks were still running through him. The concrete passage was blessedly silent and empty. The men left him back where he had started out, in the holding room. Apparently the show was over for the night. Gradually all of the animals were brought in and returned to their original places. It took a long time for his breathing to steady.

Amidst the bustling activity he didn't notice the doctor and Darmonaz approaching his cage. Without any warning his wrists were jerked downwards forcefully, and the rest of him quickly followed as his wobbly legs were taken by surprise. He found himself on his knees on the floor of the cage. Darmonaz had shortened the chain connecting his wrists to the floor, attaching his end closer to the base of the cage. Raph was pulled right up close to the bars.

"Your idea worked perfectly, doctor. Now, are you sure it's going to be sustainable?"

The doctor was fiddling with some equipment on a small metal trolley drawn up to the cage. The set-up looked vaguely familiar to Raph, with tubes coming from a plastic bag suspended on a stand…

"Yes, it should get enough liquids and nutrients through the IV to sustain it for a while. Possibly after six to eight weeks it will need some solids to re-build some body mass. But perhaps in that time it will have forgotten how to speak…"

"Is that likely?" Darmonaz looked mildly hopeful.

"I'm not sure. I don't know how long it would take an animal to forget what it has been trained to do. But it would make an interesting

study." She held a large needle up to the light, inspecting it.

Raph didn't like needles. Needles meant bad things. *Damn. I thought it was over.*

A pair of hands snaked through the bars and latched on to his left arm in an iron grip. He flinched at the contact of soft human skin – he hated being touched without his permission, especially when he couldn't do anything to resist or draw away – couldn't even bite the man's fingers. The doctor moved quickly, and before his scrambled brain could think of any retaliation there was a thick, cold needle sliding into the softer flesh on the inside of his elbow. He could *feel* it going into his veins. He gave an enormous shudder, fighting the sudden urge to be sick.

Not content with controlling his limbs and taking his voice, now they were putting stuff *inside* his body, too. Would he be left with nothing to call his own?

The two humans left and shut down the lights, plunging him into darkness. All of the unspent adrenaline seemed to leave him at once, and his shell slumped against the bars. His eyes stared unseeingly and in the aftermath of pain and shock, his mind went blessedly blank and the storm of his emotions was silenced.

Like a Light Bulb in a Dark Room

A/n: Just a quick update before I run off to watch the CGI movie again. I'm thinking I should probably wear a Plot Bunny Protection Suit...

In a week from tomorrow all my essays will be over for the semester. Hooray!

Chapter 7 – Like a Light Bulb in a Dark Room

Darkness. Emptiness. Silence. The slow movement of breath in and out of his lungs.

Then out of the blank space behind his eyelids there was a growing warmth, like the sun at his back.

Raph?

… Leo?

The presence intensified.

LEO! He tried to latch on to his brother, floundering in this mental space like a person drowning in a foot of water. As soon as he tried to hold it the connection started slipping away. But Leo's mind reached after him and wrapped around him like a blanket, holding him together.

Hold on, bro, I'm right here. Just breathe with me. Come on, breathe. That's it…

Once there would have been a time when Raph would have pushed this closeness away, resented Leo's strength and his calm and the vague scent of incense that seemed to accompany him, even here.

But right now he just felt grateful not to be alone. If he was going to be trapped inside his own head, he wouldn't mind some company.

The two of them breathed together for a while. Once he was sure he wasn't going to lose him, Leo 'spoke' in that strange combination of thoughts and impressions that they used to communicate between minds.

Where are you? What happened? Are you alright??

Raph decided to ignore that last question in favour of more important matters. *I… dunno exactly. I was at the docks. Long story short, I had to save some guy's ass from being tiger chow, but when the guys with the tranq's came to take down the tiger, they decided to nab me as well.*

*They **shot** you?!*

*With **darts** , Leo. Don't freak out. Geez. Anyway… I woke up in a cage in some warehouse. But they moved me* , he continued quickly, before Leo could go rushing off to the docks to look for him. *They… sold me, to some guy named Darmonaz* . *Runs some illegal animal show.* His temper smouldered. *They boxed me up and sent me off. I don't even know how long I was in the truck for. So now I have no idea where I am. Underground, somewhere. That's all I can tell ya.*

Leo mulled over this for a while. Seeing as it didn't look like he could just race off and rescue his brother right away, he seemed to settle for fruitless worrying, in classic Leo style.

You're alright though? You're not injured?

I'm fine. Now Raph remembered why this kind of communication was so hard for him. It was very, very difficult to lie to someone when they were sharing your mind.

No you're not. Leo's mental voice intensified, and his presence pushed on Raph, gently, trying to feel what was wrong. Raph cringed

internally as Leo seemed to discover his various aches and pains. Unable to hide them, he shoved his brother away, with more force than necessary because he was embarrassed that he'd got himself into this. He knew Leo could sense his embarrassment too, and that irked him. Normally he'd be able to hide those things under a protective layer of grumpiness. Now he felt… vulnerable.

Just leave it, Leo. I'll be alright.

What have they done to you? Why do they want you?

' *Cause a freak like me belongs in a freak show.* The thought was bitter, and it was out before he could hold it back.

Leo flinched. *You know that's not true. You belong with us.*

They've seen me, bro. They all stare at me like… Christ, they think I'm a baby-eating monster or somethin'. And I can't…

What?

I can't speak.

There was a pause. *What do you mean?*

They didn't want me talkin' ta anyone. Thought I'd give the audience the wrong idea. So they…

… *Raph,* Leo prompted *, you need to tell me. I need to know what condition you're in. For when we come to bust you out.*

Raph suddenly felt very small, and very young.

They… Leo, they stitched my mouth shut.

There was a long, deep silence.

… *They'll* ***pay*** *for this.* Leo's cold anger clouded their connection, and Raph reached after his mind clumsily as he felt it recede.

Wait, bro, don't go yet. He was just too damn tired to pretend he wasn't half-pleading. Talking to his brother was making him feel more human again. And it wasn't like he was going to get many other conversations in the near future – unless he learned sign language.

Leo had managed to bring his anger under control, but his mental voice still sounded sickened. *Some people really are bastards, aren't they?*

Yeah. Tell me about it. In the back of his mind he thought of the crowd, cheering as he writhed in his chains. *(Don't think about that),* he pulled himself away from the memory before Leo could pick up on it, and tried to change the subject.

So uh… how are Don and Mikey? Master Splinter? They all okay?

They're worried. Of course. Leo's mental voice held a touch of reproach. *You know we always worry when you disappear like this.*

Yeah , he sighed, *I know. Just… don't let them do anything stupid. And don't **you** do anything stupid either, okay? I think these guys have been in the business a while, they know what they're doing…*

Are you warning me not to do something hotheaded, Raph?

He could sense his brother's amusement, and he had to smirk. *Yeah, I guess I am* . His grin faded. *Just… take care of them. I don't ever wanna see any of you guys stuck in a place like this. Ever.*

We're going to get you out, Leo said, knowing they both needed to hear it. *What was the guy's name – Darmonaz? – I'll set Don on to him, there's gotta be some information about him on… on the internet, or…*

I dunno about that, Raph thought doubtfully *. If your business is gonna break **that** many laws, ya wouldn't exactly be advertisin' it in the local paper, ya know?*

We'll find a way. Leo's tone brooked no argument. *You just need to hold on until we can come for you. After all* – Raph could clearly picture one side of his brother's mouth quirking upwards – *you were the one who rescued me last time, so now it's my turn to save **your** butt* .

That didn't count.

Huh? What didn't count?

Last time. It was my own damn fault you were in trouble in the first place.

And again, the broken swords hung shining in the air between them. Even now, Raph couldn't bring himself to speak of it, couldn't put it into words. It didn't matter: he knew Leo could sense everything, as clear as day. The guilt, the shame, the fear of what he'd almost done.

*Maybe… maybe I really **am** an animal* . The thought floated through Raph's mind involuntarily, and he knew this time Leo had caught it.

Don't think that , came Leo's fierce voice. *Don't you **ever** think that* . *You can't let them get to you like this –*

But maybe I deserve to be stuck in this damn place. I mean, Leo, that night, I could've… I was this close to…

- I trust you. His brother's voice cut across the thought, quiet and firm. *I trust you with my life. I always have, I always will. Got that?*

For a few heartbeats, Raph couldn't think of how to respond. *But –*

*Look, we'll talk about it later, Raph. **Really** talk, I mean, face to face, when you're home and safe. I want to be able to hear your **voice** .*

… *Yeah* , Raph capitulated after a second. *Yeah, me too.*

Good. Leo's thought was gentle. *We'll be seeing you real soon, then.* His presence began to fade *. Just keep it together, bro. Just hold*

on…

When he was gone it was dark and lonely inside Raph's mind.

In the lair, Leo stirred and began to come out of his deep meditative state. It was late at night. Don had stayed up tinkering with his tools in front of the TV, and Mikey was ostensibly watching cartoons, but really they were both just waiting up to see if Leo had found anything. As they had been for the last couple of nights; the whole family was beginning to feel a little sleep-deprived.

On this night something in his presence must have been different, because as soon as Leo walked into the room his brothers' heads snapped towards him, as if they sensed the extra tension to the set of his shoulders.

"I found him," he announced needlessly. "Well, not exactly," he qualified, as his brothers shot to their feet. "I don't know where he's being held. But I contacted him, and he's… well, he's a little bruised and battered, but he's okay. Mostly." His voice turned hard. "Apparently some opportunist thought he'd look good in a circus show."

"Heh," said Mikey, completely lacking his usual humour, "I bet Raph just *loves* that."

"I don't think it's your average circus, either." Leo hesitated. He didn't really want to tell them, but they needed to know. And it wasn't like his younger brothers were innocent of the cruelty that some humans could be capable of. "He said they didn't want him to communicate with anyone who came to see the show. So they sewed his mouth shut."

Don closed his eyes for a long moment, as if in pain. "Oh, Raph…" he breathed softly. "He must be going crazy already."

"But we can go get him, right?" asked Mikey impatiently, blue eyes fixed upon his eldest brother's face.

"As soon as we can figure out where he *is* , then yeah." Mikey looked vaguely hurt at Leo's snappish tone, and he immediately felt bad.

"Sorry. I'm sorry… you know my frustration isn't directed at you. It's just… I hate it when this happens." He rubbed a hand across his face.

"S'ok, bro," Mikey grinned at him. "Someone's gotta be the Grumpy Raph when he's not around."

Don was already moving over to his computer corner. "So, how much do we know? Where do we start the search?"

Leo sighed, and began to list the few paltry details that he was relying on to somehow lead them to their brother.

Waking up to Darkness

A/n: *Gack.* Apologies for the long wait for this update. This was the chapter of DOOM. I pushed through it, but I'm not 100 happy with it. It feels both rushed and too long at the same time, but... I'm kind of sick of looking at it so here it is.

I'll stop complaining now before I talk you out of reading!

(Also - apologies in advance if there's a few more typos than usual, I'm trying to proof-read at 3:30am. Cause I'm smart like that).

Chapter 8 – Waking Up To Darkness

The next time Raph awoke, the shock and the adrenaline of the night before had well and truly worn off, and his body was stiff and aching. The thin layer of mangy straw hadn't done much to cushion the hard steel floor of the cage. It was still oppressively dark, and cold. As soon as he shifted his body he was reminded of the needle and tube sticking out of his arm.

He wondered if he should try and pull it out.

His stomach still felt achingly empty. He'd have to be pretty desperate to ever opt for a slow death by starvation, and anyway they probably wouldn't let him get that far. He put the idea aside.

The darkness was disorienting when his body told him he'd been asleep for hours. The quiet noises of the animals were the only sounds in the room. His wrists were still chained down near the floor of the cage.

He wondered if they were going to keep him on his knees.

It would be so easy to go crazy in this place.

So easy. *Get a grip, Raphael* . It was really goddamn hard to relax his breathing when he could only breathe through his nose. *Stitched like a piece of meat* . The stray thought made his stomach turn over. Slowly, he bent his face down to where his hands were chained, and felt awkwardly with his fingers. The plastic wire holding his mouth shut was thick and strong – strong enough to hold through all of his frenzied cries of pain last night. Touching it now reawakened the burning in his face.

He wondered if he could rip it out.

The problem was it'd probably take half his face with it. He had a sudden image of himself with his mouth ripped open, blood dripping from his torn flesh, like something out of one of Mikey's B-grade horror films. And he could imagine how Mikey would flinch away from him in fear, in disgust… He wished his brain would stop throwing these pictures at him. He needed to be coming up with some sort of plan of action, not psyching himself out.

But there was simply nothing to come up with. He was blind, silenced, and well and truly stuck. The room stayed dark for hours, and all he could do was simmer in his own frustration. And with nothing to distract it, his mind worked of its own accord. He wished he could switch it off. He wasn't the kind of turtle whose thoughts automatically turned to positive things – that was Mikey's job. Raph was more of a glass-half-empty kind of guy.

He wondered if he really would forget how to speak, if he was trapped here long enough.

He wondered, if it came to that, (if he was *reduced* to that), if his family would want him back.

Don't be ridiculous , snapped Don's voice in his head.

Yeah. He knew that. He knew they'd come, no matter what. But he really didn't want them to see him like this. And he couldn't figure out how in the hell they were going to find him, anyway. And he *hated*

the fact that he was helpless in the mean time. He didn't like being rescued as if he was some stupid damsel in distress. But it wouldn't be the first time. *Why do I always screw things up?*

And so on, and so on; his thoughts grumbled mercilessly while he sat in the darkness. He was almost grateful when the harsh strip lights flickered on that evening, and the world had light and colour again.

He didn't stay grateful for very long. Max made sure of that. He'd come in with a couple of other men to feed the dogs and prepare for that night's entertainment. He paused on his way past Raph's cage, taking a step back to peer at him more closely. A slow smile spread across his face.

"Didja have fun last night, freak?" Max had a shaved head and a tiny little bit of fuzz under his bottom lip. Raph decided that he hated goatees.

"What, no smart-ass comments for me today? Not so smug now, are ya?"

How do you ignore someone , Raph thought, *when you can't make it obvious you're ignoring them?* Turning his face away would have looked too much like submission, so he settled for the good old death-glare. It didn't seem to be having much effect, however.

"You got nothin' to say to me?" Max's voice was getting louder.

Yep. It'd been too much to hope that this idiot would have forgotten his insults of the other day.

"Huh." He pushed his stupid goateed face right up against the bars. "I guess animals can't talk after all."

Raph could feel the unspoken words pooling inside his closed mouth. He wondered if he would choke on them, if it was possible to drown in words that he couldn't let out. Normally he'd pour them into

his actions (more specifically, into his fists). Now he tried to put them into his eyes instead, and let them smoulder there.

"Hey Max," one of the other men whined, "you actually gonna help us here, or jus' stand around chatting?"

"Yeah, yeah." He gave Raph one last insufferable smirk and then moved away. Raph slowly let out the breath he'd been holding.

The dogs snapped and barked over their food. The bear growled at the hunk of meat thrown into its cage, and the tiger snarled.

Raphael was silent.

They put him out on display again that night. He couldn't decide if it was worse or better this time – the drug-induced haze was gone from his brain, which was a plus, but it made everything that much sharper, brighter, more horribly real. He was even more conscious of his own powerlessness as he was wheeled out into the spotlights. They'd let out the chain around his wrists, so at least he wasn't forced to stay on his knees. *There's no sport if the animal's already down* , he thought sourly.

If he was being honest with himself, he'd admit that the audience frightened him. They seemed somehow inhuman – in the gleam of their eyes as they stared up at him in disgusted fascination, the way their fingers tightened around their beer bottles, their rough voices.

He'd been called an animal before. He'd lost count of the number of times in his life he'd been called a freak. But he'd never had it demonstrated quite like this. Name-calling he could handle, but this… they were turning him into what they expected him to be. And it was so *easy* . It shouldn't be so easy. He should have more of himself to hold on to. But it all happened so fast, once the crowd was there. The black energy in the stuffy air built up like a tidal wave, and crashed against Raphael. Nothing he could do could hold it back or fend it off.

On one side of his cage there was a gaggle of underage girls giggling to each other and pointing at him, their faces glowing with their own daring at being in this place. Raph wanted to tell them to go home to their daddies, and stop wasting time in this lowlife dump. When he shook his head at them slightly, they shrieked and nudged one another. He turned his back on them.

But on the other side of his cage there was a small group of men in suits. And, okay, at least they weren't *giggling* and pointing… but they were still laughing at him, sharing comments and observations. Raph couldn't see what was supposed to be so funny. He was not amused. He was just getting more pissed off by the minute.

Anger was good. Anger was the fuel that kept him burning. If he could stay angry, then he could stay *Raphael* .

When the crowd was at its fullest, Darmonaz appeared to give the same hate-speech from yesterday. Some of the phrases he repeated word-for-word, but he was versatile, playing off his audience. *Quite the Ringmaster* , Raph sneered to himself. Darmonaz knew when to make an emphatic gesture, a dramatic pause, when to lower his voice conspiratorially and when to bellow his poisonous words over the agitated sounds of the crowd. He played them – used Raph to manipulate them.

It *was* worse this time, Raph decided, because this time he knew how it was going to end. He had a pretty high pain tolerance, for sure – but to know it was coming, and to know there was no escape from it –

Yes, there was the taser, and there was the fire in his nerve-endings, and there was the roar of the crowd. His yells stayed locked inside of him for the most part, but the stitching couldn't hold them back completely.

"We'll teach it not to mess with us!"

He tried to dodge as it came for him again, but –

"Mmrrrgh!" – couldn't. Couldn't stop his own desperate-sounding cries straining in the back of his throat, or the heave of his chest, or the way he pulled convulsively on the chain that connected his wrists to the floor. If he could only bring them up he could try to protect himself, but –

" *Grrrrrgh* !" – couldn't. Not for the last time, he felt a sudden, intense flash of hatred; not just for the man holding the taser, but for the people in the crowd who thought it was a great source of entertainment.

He knew Darmonaz could hear the muffled noises he was making, and he hated that even more.

Godamnit. Just let this be over already .

And eventually, it was. But only for the night.

After the show closed, he discovered a new complication: apparently this gig was a *travelling* circus.

The men wheeled his cage out to the back room and straight into the back of the waiting truck. They pushed it into one corner with a metallic clang, and one of them bent down and fiddled with something on the bottom of the cage – probably locking the wheels in place. The other animal cages were pushed on soon after, and crammed together tightly. Raph could hear Darmonaz's voice giving out orders somewhere, but the dog cages were being stacked one on top of the other just inside the back doors of the truck, blocking his vision.

The tiger's cage was pressed right up against his, and (remembering the fight that got him into this mess), he made sure to stay right back in the far corner of his cage. But Tigger seemed to be as sapped of energy as Raph *felt* . When the steel doors of the truck slammed shut and he heard the bolts slide into place, Raph allowed himself to sink down and rest on his knees, and let his head hang low.

The dogs' barking ricocheted and echoed in the small space, leaving him with a pounding headache. A bird shrieked every ten seconds or so, which didn't help. The tiger was a silent, still presence close by. Raph felt like it was watching him in the pitch blackness, even as the truck's engine shuddered to life, causing a new cacophony of animal noises.

He was being transported as *livestock* . He wrinkled his nose in disgust, and then winced as the movement pulled at the stitching painfully. He exhaled a frustrated sigh, and slumped back against the bars.

Raph could still feel the tiger watching him as the rumbling, swaying movement of the truck and his own aching body lulled him to a strange place between sleeping and waking.

Leo was there. It was raining. Raph was crouched on all fours, and he couldn't speak. Slowly, deliberately, he advanced on his brother, his striped tail lashing from side to side.

"Raph… what are you doing?!"

The words were meaningless in his ears. He only snarled viciously, and pounced. Leo fell beneath him, Raph's sai held at his throat. The rain fell all around them. Leo's bewildered eyes looked up into his face, while his breath hissed sharply through his fangs. He raised an arm, preparing to strike. With the strange foresight that sometimes comes in dreams, he knew what he was about to do - and if he could only speak, then he could prevent it. He forced his stitched mouth open and tried to order himself to stop…

He had no voice . His mouth gaped open silently. His sai descended towards Leo's throat –

- The truck lurched to a stop, jolting him abruptly out of the dream. His eyes flew open.

He was getting really sick of waking up to darkness.

Sliding Into Apathy

Chapter 9: Sliding Into Apathy

.

" *And I don't want to slide into apathy*

And I don't want to die in captivity

But these monsters follow me around

Hunting me down, trying to wipe me out…"

- 'Monsters', Something For Kate.

Raphael was unloaded with all of the other animals at their next destination, and the cycle began again.

He still had no idea where he was, but the set-up was very similar to the last place – the animals were stored during the day in a small, cramped room, and at night they were taken out to a slightly larger 'display room'. This place was somewhat more seedy than the last venue – it looked more like the basement of an abandoned building than a legal function room. But the location didn't really matter: the audience was just there for the spectacle, the adrenaline rush of dominance.

Raphael's life slipped disturbingly quickly into a pattern, a repetition of long, darkened days and brief, artificially brightened nights, his eyes never adjusting to their painful glare.

He didn't want to get used to the pattern. He was terrified of how quickly it wore him down – not being able to fight back in any way. And he didn't like the way the Doctor looked at him on the occasions she was called in to check up on the animals. He saw the finger

tapping thoughtfully against her chin as she examined him through the bars, the light flashing off her glasses, and he knew she was mentally calculating body mass, nutrient levels, reducing him to a series of equations… pondering the probability of him losing his powers of speech altogether. *Not damn likely* , he wanted to tell her, but then he thought – *if they unstitched me now, what would I say? Would it even make a difference?*

He was kept on the IV when not in the display room. His inner elbows became bruised and marked; they caught his eye one evening and caused him to realise, with something of a shock, that he must have been stuck in that cage for more than just a few days.

The IV kept him going, but it was barely enough for sustenance. The constant hunger was one thing he couldn't get used to; he was kept teetering on the brink of it, his guts feeling shrunken and strange for the lack of solid food. It left him weakened and distracted.

On one of the countless days, before the evening show, a couple of men came in with large buckets of water and scrubbing brushes. One of them started on the dogs, pulling down cages one by one and muzzling the animal before washing it roughly and shoving it back in.

For a brief second Raph almost got his hopes up – but of course, they weren't going to let him out of his cage. He'd proven himself too dangerous for that. Instead, the second man attached a hose to a faucet on one wall, then came to stand in front of Raph's cage with a bored expression. He pressed down on a trigger nozzle and a jet of icy cold water sprayed out and hit Raph just above his plastron. He jerked away from it in reaction, but the jet of water just followed him as the man hosed him down. It stung a little as the water dribbled down his face and over his mangled, cracked lips. But then a few precious drops seeped into his mouth between the stitching, and landed on his parched tongue. His eyes actually fell closed in unintended bliss at the sensation, and he struggled to draw in more liquid through his lips. His throat worked to swallow.

When he opened his eyes again he found the man with the hose looking at him thoughtfully. The man made no comment then, but the next day a pail of water was placed in a corner of Raph's cage, and he found he could drink again, after a fashion; painfully, a few drops at a time, but it was something.

During the long periods of darkness, Raphael began to dream that the bars of the cage were gradually drawing closer to him, shrinking the space until the cold metal was pressing up against him on all sides. His chains grew tighter, and began to strangle him. *He couldn't get out he couldn't get out he couldn't…*

He would awaken, sweating and shaking, to find the cage the same size it was originally. He still felt like he was suffocating.

He was packed up and moved again, and he lost track of how many times he was moved after that. Different buildings, different windowless rooms, but the faces remained more or less the same.

Not *all* the faces blended into the crowd. Raphael found it disconcerting when individuals seemed to jump out at him, even make eye contact.

There was one this one girl, on a night like any of the others. She was dressed all in black, and she had black hair, a stud in her nose, and kohl outlining her dark eyes. She held a soda in one pale hand, sipping from it occasionally, and gazing up at him in his cage. She watched him for ages as the audience trickled in and gathered around. She didn't look impressed, but for some reason Raph got the feeling that the cold look in her eyes was not directed at him.

When Darmonaz stepped up onto the platform to stir up the crowd for the night, her slight frame slipped between figures until she was close to the front. Just a few metres away from Raph, and by now he was watching her as intently as she was watching him.

And she was looking at him like… she *saw* him. Not just another animal, but *him* . Maybe he was getting desperate, just imagining things, but when they brought the taser out he thought he saw her eyes narrow and her fingers tighten around her drink. He lost her in the first feral surge of the crowd as the taser made contact with the exposed skin on his arm. He struggled not to curve over himself, trying to stay upright, and searching for her face again. When he found it he latched on to it with a ridiculous hope. Jesus, she *saw* him, and he locked his gaze on her as Darmonaz gave him another brief zap. Held it like a lifeline.

It was the closest he'd come to communication in many, many days.

" *Hrnn - !* "

The cold anger and outrage on her face as she watched the man with the taser reminded him of Leo. *Please* , he was speaking to her in his mind, *I miss my brothers. My father is probably worryin' himself sick and tryin' not ta show it. I'm just like you.* He was searching desperately for that spark of recognition in her. *I miss ridin' my bike. I wrote crappy adolescent poetry when I was younger. I secretly love cheesy nineties films. Please…* Please…

He didn't even know what he was asking her for, but afterwards he was almost grateful that his mouth was fastened shut. Otherwise he would have been begging out loud. And Raphael *did not beg* .

The girl disappeared before the show was over, and the memory of the look of pure disgust she shot at Darmonaz as she was leaving was enough to get Raph through another few days.

Sometimes he tried to meditate. He had enough spare time to kill and nothing better to do. At first he was attempting to contact Leo again. He told himself it was because he needed to let his brother know that his location was being changed every so often, but really it was because he needed to hear a friendly voice. Hell, he'd *kill* to hear one of Leo's patented lectures right about now.

But as the days went by and he still couldn't master that mental reaching-out, his meditation changed, turned inward. Instead of searching for Leo, he looked for himself, trying to find some vestiges to cling to in this place, trying to stay sane.

He would not let them reduce him to an animal. And if meditation was the only way he could fight back, then that was damn well what he was going to do, no matter how much he's complained about the activity in the past. *Work with what ya have* , he told himself firmly.

But he didn't always like what he found in his long, dark sessions. He thought of his brothers and Sensei a lot, of course – that was inevitable, with a family as small and tight-knit as theirs. But when he was looking for some sort of comfort or strength, more and more often he remembered instead the way his gentlest brother flinched at his fist raised in intimidation, or the way his most hyperactive brother cowered away when Raph flew into one of his rages after a prank pushed him just that little bit too far. He tried to banish the images from his mind, let them fall away as his father had taught him, but they were increasingly difficult to block out.

One night, when all the animals were locked away after the show, Raph watched as Max threw a dripping, bloody chunk of meat into the tiger's cage. The tiger pounced on it immediately. Still stirred up by the recent exposure to the bright lights and the crowd, the tiger tore into the meat ferociously, shaking it in his jaws. Drops of red spattered the bars and stained his fangs. Raph saw the tiger's long, pink tongue extend and lick the blood from the fur around the muzzle.

Raphael had a particularly vivid dream that night. His familiar dream of the shrinking cage segued into a rainy night on one of the rooftops of Manhattan.

Prey. There was prey here.

The adrenaline of the chase pumps through his veins like a drug. He can sense every raindrop as it hit his skin.

Eyes narrow as he locks on to his prey. *There. Attack* .

Movement of muscles. The breath moving in and out of his lungs. His prey falls, and he gives a savage roar of triumph. Brown eyes look up at him from a blue mask, shocked, bewildered. Horribly, Raphael feels his dream-self smile.

He leans over his fallen prey, and his sai, no, his *claws* rip into the exposed flesh of the throat.

The prey's strangled cry of pain is quickly cut off as his windpipe is opened up, and blood sprays out. The body twitches and flops in the last throes of life, then goes still.

"Raph," Leo's dead body rasped, impossibly. " *Raphael* …"

Dream-Raph licked at the drops of blood that had landed on his lips. Then he bent over the corpse of his prey, and began to feed.

Raph jerked awake from that dream to find himself screaming. Or trying to scream. The noises coming from behind his stitched lips were awful, desperate and animalistic, and they *hurt* , but he couldn't seem to stop. He lurched to his feet inside the pitch-black cage, tripping on the chains around his ankles. He came up against the bars, hard. For a few seconds, before he could get control of himself, he threw his body against them, frantically searching for a way out which he knew wasn't there. *Like an animal in a trap* .

Eventually he managed to stop his own muffled cries. His breath hitched as he settled back on the cold floor, the adrenaline leaving his body in a debilitating rush. He was shaking. In his frantic movements the IV line had become partially dislodged, and it stuck out now at an uncomfortably strange angle.

God, he was losing it. What sort of sick freak dreamed of murdering his brother? *What sort of sick freak almost carried through with it?*

Animal . The word thudded in his mind, keeping time with his heartbeat, relentless.

Animal.

Another town, another night. Max helped to push Raph's cage out into the spotlights. The man had stopped antagonising Raphael a while ago, and now just treated him the same as he treated all the other animals. Raph actually missed his stupid insults – at least they'd meant that someone was *talking* to him, and expecting him to understand. These days Max was just indifferent.

The cage wheels were locked into place when they reached their designated spot. Darmonaz ordered the doors open for the audience. Raph grasped the bars with his chained hands, leaning on them to support some of his weight. No point in sitting. They'd just get him up again.

Medium crowd tonight , Raph surmised as they made their way in. *Lookin' for their little fix of violence and superiority* . *Just your average evening in the freakshow* .

When one of the fighting dogs was removed from the ring, blood dripping from the remnants of its paw, the crowd started to shift towards Raph's cage with herd mentality, and Darmonaz recognised his cue. His horror stories about the 'giant turtle monster' had grown even more outlandish over time, but apparently the audience would swallow anything. They just needed an excuse to get *angry* at something.

Weird how you can never really get used to pain , Raph thought hazily, actually managing to dodge the next jab of the taser towards his plastron. Tonight wasn't going too badly; at this rate he certainly wasn't going to finish the night on his knees, which was a good sign. He'd just have a few more bruises and burns to add to his collection.

A fresh wave of pain sent him reeling, and the sea of vicious faces blurred together below him as he spun. They were building up to the finish now, and he grit his teeth together behind closed lips. He tried to keep his chin jutted up, defiantly. He had lifted his eyes to glare at Darmonaz when he saw it.

… No. I must be hallucinating. That can't be…

For a second there, right at the back of the crowd on the far side of the room, he thought he'd seen…

Casey Jones.

Casey- *fucking* -Jones.

"Alright, Leo, I'm in. Got my ticket at the door 'n everthing. Even more freakin' expensive than that last place we tried. Looks like it's in full swing; pretty busy."

"Good work, Case. What do you see?"

"Well, they gotta a few animals here, so it could be right, but… hang on, somethin's goin' on towards the back."

"Just try not to attract attention."

"…"

"Casey?"

" *Shit* . Leo…"

"Casey, *what is it* ?"

"It's… he's here."

A second of charged silence.

"Alright, pull out. We'll – "

"No! Leo, they're… they're *hurting* him. And he's… *jesus* …"

"… Is he in any danger?"

"Well… I guess not really, but – "

"Then we go in tonight, when everyone's gone."

"I can't – I can't stand here and watch this. It's sick, man."

"Then get out of there. We've got what we needed."

"Alright." Casey's voice shook over the phone line. "… *Fuck* ."

A/n: ... Eep. Honestly, I really hate to leave it there. But I'm going away on a snow holiday with some friends next week, and I'm not sure how much time I'm going to get to write. So expect the next chapter in roughly two weeks time (though I've never been capable of working to schedules, so I'm not making any promises...)

Once again: Reviews are, as we all know, pretty much the coolest things ever. Mucho thankies to everyone for their comments!

The Carnival is Over

A/n: Okay, so I lied. It was less than two weeks. Go me!

Chapter 10 – The Carnival is Over

Leo kept his arms crossed to ward off the 3am chill. His eyes were narrowed and distant as he leaned against the wall in the shadows of the warehouse across the street from the building they were watching.

Don and Mikey knew not to disturb him when he had that 'leader' look on his face. He could hear them murmuring to each other very quietly in the shadows next to him, and he was glad they were keeping their distance. He had to be able to focus, and right now he could only do that if he was Leader, not Brother. He'd almost lost control with Casey's phone call. The leader in him knew they had to wait for the darkest hours of the night when they wouldn't be seen. But the brother in him was dying to storm in and do some damage to the people who'd been ignorant enough to cause harm to his family.

Raph . It was cruel to finally be so close to him now, just across the street, and to have to wait. It made him ache, and pushed his self-control to its limits.

So he was glad that Mikey and Don were refraining from questioning him.

He leaned forward suddenly and his eyes narrowed even further. A man in a long, dark overcoat was leaving the front entrance of the building, locking the doors behind him. The tension rose palpably between the three turtles as the man got into his car and drove away. All of the windows of the building were now dark.

Leo could feel the eyes of the other two on him. They had been waiting until they thought the building was completely deserted, and this was probably their best bet. He didn't have the heart to hold them (or himself) back any longer.

"Time to go."

They ignored the front entrance, ducking across the empty street to the back of the building, making their way to the truck delivery area. As well as one docking space on ground level there was a driveway leading down below ground, closed by a roller door.

Leo huddled down with Mikey in the shadows of the door as Don set to work on the simple electric panel to one side. Barely a minute, and he had raised the door just enough so that they could enter at a crouch.

"Too easy," Don commented. "We've dealt with a lot tighter security than this before."

"This ain't exactly Foot Headquarters, bro. What would they *need* security for in this place?"

"I guess there's not much to steal in here..."

Leo agreed privately - most of the upper floors of the building had been abandoned, and there probably wasn't much of any interest on the lower floors. But somehow it burned him to think of Raphael being kept in a place where no one ever thought anyone would bother to break in. They never even suspected that he could be worth it, that someone could be searching for him.

What if he's given up? What if he thinks we aren't coming? He shoved the thoughts away; now was not the time to dwell on them. *Focus.*

Through the door they found the driveway continued downhill a short distance, illuminated by only some minimal safety lighting. The walls

were a grimy concrete, and the ceiling was low overhead. There was a slightly mouldy smell in the still air.

The three turtles moved forward soundlessly down the passage. Next to the empty truck bay at the end there was a short flight of stairs. They went up and through another door (this one unlocked) to find themselves in another passageway, much smaller, with doors spaced along one side at irregular intervals.

"Do we split up?" Don asked.

Leo considered for a second. "No, better not. According to Casey, the men here were armed, and if anyone's still here after hours they'll probably be very interested in getting their hands on us. We'll just check the rooms one by one. He's got to be down here somewhere."

Mikey seemed to be leaning all his weight on the balls of his feet, desperate to start searching.

They began at one end of the corridor and worked their way down, pulling out narrow torches to light their way rather than risking switching any lights on and attracting unwanted attention. The first few doors they tried were just broom cupboards and empty storage spaces. Another room appeared to be a disused cafeteria.

"… Are you sure we're in the right place?" Mikey was beginning to look worried.

"This *has* to be it," Don hissed, his eyes narrowing as he opened a door to peer into yet another room.

This one was a small auditorium, and all three of them could sense immediately that this space had been used very recently. The floor was sticky with spilt beer, and the stale smell of sweat and cigarette smoke still hung in the air.

They walked slowly into the centre of the room. Leo bent down to pick up a piece of straw from the ground. The three of them looked at it for a moment.

"There's more over here!" Mikey scrambled up and onto the small stage at one end of the auditorium, and Don and Leo followed, their torch beams sweeping the ground in front of them. Don fumbled behind the curtains at the back of the stage.

"Stage door," he murmured to Leo.

"Let's try it," Leo moved to join him. "We're running out of places to search."

The door was unlocked, and creaked open at Don's push. The three brothers found themselves in yet another dinky brick passageway. It rounded a corner, and before them they saw a door labelled 'Stage Props'. Leo opened it.

Even before the light of his torch could illuminate the cramped room, he knew that he wasn't alone in there. There was rustling, breathing, and eyes shining out at him from the darkness. He took a tentative step forward.

"Raph," he called softly, "are you in here?" The other two behind him seemed to be holding their breath.

Leo raised his torch and let its beam sweep across the room, revealing rows of cages. A couple of the dogs inside growled half-heartedly at him.

"These cages are far too small," Don muttered disapprovingly. "I bet the RSPCA would have something to say about – *woah* !"

"What?" Two other torch beams swung towards him.

A large tiger stared blearily up at Don from where it lay curled on the floor of its cage.

"Woah," Mikey agreed quietly. Don backed away from the cage to stand beside his brothers.

"How the heck did they get a *tiger* here?"

"… Maybe the same way they got the bear?" Mikey suggested weakly, his torch pointed at the sleeping creature.

Leo continued to search the room, his hopes fading. He had been so *sure* that Raph would still be here…

Then the light from his torch fell across something dark green to the left of the tiger's cage. Don and Mikey heard his indrawn breath, and added their torchlight to his.

Raphael squinted back at them against the bright light, and at the sight of his missing brother's face behind the bars of a cage, all the muscles in Leo's body seemed to freeze up.

He hadn't *forgotten* what Raph had told him about the stitching. He'd been shocked, and outraged, but he hadn't been able to *picture* it. Not like this. The black stitches criss-crossed Raphael's beak, thick and harsh against his skin. They changed his whole face, making him almost unrecognisable. Leo could feel himself staring, horrified, but couldn't turn away.

The frozen tableau was broken by a tiny, muffled noise in the back of Mikey's throat. Leo's muscles came unlocked all at once and he stumbled forward suddenly, completely lacking his usual grace. At the same second, Raphael closed his eyes and turned his face away from the light of their torches.

He doesn't want us to see him , Leo realised with a wrench of misery as he reached his brother's side. *Oh, Raph. You idiot. We* need *to see you* . He reached through the bars to grip Raph's arm, reassuring himself that he was real. Raph seemed to sag slightly under his touch, still avoiding his gaze.

"Raph, it's okay, we're getting you out," Mikey babbled next to Leo. He examined the sturdy padlock on the door of the cage. "Donny?"

Don stepped up, the massive boltcutters already out of his bag. Leo just stayed out of his way as he removed the lock, and kept his hand on Raph's arm. His skin was cool to the touch, and shivering ever so slightly. Mikey hovered.

The padlock fell to the floor with a clank, and one side of the cage swung open on its hinges. Don stepped inside, and knelt down beside his brother on the straw.

"Okay. Let's get you out of here, bro." Gently, he lifted the cuffs binding Raph's wrists, and ran one hand up his arm to where the IV needle sank into his dark green flesh. Don felt a small tremor run through Raph's body as he slowly removed the needle. Once that was done, he moved back to his brother's wrists and found where they were chained down to the floor. He set to work, and soon the chains holding Raph down and hobbling his ankles had been flung to one side.

"I can't get the cuffs off until we get back to the Battleshell," said Don apologetically, helping Raph to his feet.

Leonardo was watching his brother's expression as Raph took his first step out of the cage. It was nervous, uncertain. He seemed battered and a little weak, but quite capable of staying on his feet. Mikey moved up beside him anyway, and slung one of Raph's arms across his shoulders to support him. Raph grunted slightly as the muscles in his arms were stretched in a new direction. Leo could clearly see Raph wanted to protest at the 'invalid treatment', and claim that he could walk just fine on his own. The look of frustration on his face spoke louder than words, but in a way Leo was glad to see it. It was a spark of the Raphael he knew.

"Let's get out of here," Leo said. Don nodded, and flipped open his shell cell.

"Casey, we're ready to go. Bring the Battleshell around."

Raphael stumbled twice on his way out of the room, his legs unused to so much movement. As Mikey coaxed him out the door, he looked backwards over his shoulder one last time. He thought he could see the tiger's amber eyes glowing at him in the dark.

To be honest, Raphael didn't remember much of the ride home. He didn't even really remember getting out of the building, just the impression of open space, way too much space around him and an enormous sky yawning over his head. Then the aching relief of the Battleshell's familiar interior, his brothers crowded around him, too close and suffocating like they always were but he'd let them get away with it this time because, well, *because* . And there was Casey at the wheel, his stupid face all scrunched up when he caught sight of Raph, and if that was pity then he was going to beat his fucking head in, because he couldn't take that from Casey. Casey, who (Raph knew he hadn't imagined it, now) had seen him as trapped and helpless as he'd ever been, who'd seen…

Raph turned his head away from the front seat and let Casey get on with the driving.

As soon as Don had got the first of the metal cuffs off, Raph felt Leo grip one of his hands in his own. Raph almost rolled his eyes – he usually hated this kind of thing, but just for now it seemed easier to go along with it. It was almost nice, for once, to not be expected to put his thoughts into clumsy words; to have an excuse for silence. So when Leonardo squeezed his hand softly, Raph didn't let himself think about it too much, and just squeezed back.

Coming Unravelled

A/n: Well, this chapter didn't turn out how I expected... I was expecting only one chapter and an epilogue after chapter 10, but Don hijacked this part, so there will be more. The joys of not planning out where your story is going, haha. I'm just hoping it hasn't thrown the pacing totally out of whack.

Chapter 11 – Coming Unravelled

Raphael almost wished that Splinter wouldn't be waiting for him when they reached the Lair, but nothing could have kept his father from his front-door vigil. Splinter moved with a speed that belied his age, and he was beside Raphael before his son had taken more than two steps into the Lair.

Raph was grateful that his father managed to control his expression at the sight of his face. He wondered just how long Splinter had been holding his breath for, as he exhaled:

"Raphael, my son." He reached up to place his paws on his shoulders. "It is good to have you home," he said simply, pulling him into a light embrace, and then mercifully releasing him.

Home. Raphael absently shook off his brothers' hands from where they lingered on his arms and shoulders. He stood unaided just inside the entrance of the Lair, trying to breathe deeply through his nose. *Home* . In the terrifyingly familiar space he wanted to be relieved, but instead he felt out of place. Just a short while ago, he'd been nothing more than a freak in a cage. Right now he was intensely conscious of the wires piercing his flesh, burning reminders of where he'd come from. How could he belong here again?

"… Raph?" Mikey looked as if he wanted to ask if he was alright, but already knew the answer. They were all looking at him. Watching him.

"Come on, bro." Donatello took advantage of his distraction and began to lead him to the lab. "Let's get you fixed up."

Keeping an eye on Raph's faltering steps and a hand ready to steady him if he stumbled, Don sensed the presence of his other two brothers drawn along in his wake, as if they were connected magnetically to the one they had been missing for so long. At the door to his lab he paused and looked back at them over his shoulder.

"I think I can handle this without supervision, you guys." He said pointedly. Raph continued into the lab, seemingly oblivious to the stand-off behind him.

"But Don – "

"Leo," Don lowered his voice, "I know you don't want to let him out of your sight right now, but… can't you see how uncomfortable you're making him?"

Mikey's puppy-dog-eyes fell slightly.

"Just give him a little space. At least til I've got the… the stitching out." His stomach clenched at the words, but judging by the look of resignation on Leo's face, he was beginning to get through to him.

"Will he be okay?" Mikey asked, seeking some sort of reassurance.

"… Physically? I should think so."

After a moment, Leo sighed. "Do what you can, Don. Mikey and I will wait out here." He took his youngest brother by the arm and led him firmly to the couch. Mikey was still trying to peer through the door into the lab, right up until Don disappeared through it and shut it

behind him. Mikey's eyes snapped down to the floor and he sat on the couch abruptly.

"Mikey?" Leo tried to block out his feelings of uselessness as he sat beside him. His brother's eyes remained downcast, his arms crossed over his chest. When he spoke, there was a strange tightness in his voice.

"I hate seeing Raph like that."

"We all do - "

" – But it was like I couldn't stop staring. Couldn't look away. Couldn't stop thinking about what he must have gone through, in that place. Geez, Leo, what kind of *sick* people…" His throat closed over and prevented him from finishing the sentence, so he just shook his head slowly as his eyes squeezed shut.

Leo could find no answer for him. Michelangelo had always believed in the best parts of human nature. Every time some scumbag stole a purse or robbed a store he was disappointed, but he always seemed to bounce back to maintain a faith in humanity that none of the rest of his family had ever quite been able to share. But Leo suspected that this was going to put a permanent dent in Mikey's attitude. To Mikey, it would seem like a betrayal of trust, that people could be capable of such actions.

Leo's world-view was slightly more jaded than Mikey's, and sadly, he was not all that surprised at the levels to which people were capable of stooping.

He found that the lack of surprise did not seem to reduce his pain at seeing the results.

Don closed the lab door behind him, and turned to find Raphael standing in front of the medicine cabinet on the wall, staring at his

own reflection in the mirrored doors, with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

Understanding came to Don in a flash – *No mirrors in that place. This must be the first time he's seen himself since they* …

Raphael lifted a hand slowly to his face. He touched the stitching with one thick finger. His beak was swollen and inflamed. The wire had never been given the time to heal over and settle into the skin. Almost every night, when he couldn't stop his reflexive yells (or when his anger got the better of him and he tried to scream curses at the crowd), the stitching had tugged at his flesh.

Darmonaz was right , he thought with something approaching numbness. His appearance *was* … monstrous. Not human. Even less human than he had been before, though he hadn't thought that would be possible… and even the removal of the stitches wouldn't fix that, not really. He felt very cold. *The monster is under the skin* .

"Raph." Don's pained voice interrupted his thoughts, and he dragged his face away from the mirror. Don was standing next to the medical bed, waiting for him with an expression that was as close to neutral as he could manage.

Raph eyed the white sheets of the bed with distaste. He had always hated playing the Patient to Don's Doctor. He made himself cross the room anyway, and sat on the edge of the bed. There was a smooth electrical buzz as Don raised the head of the bed up into a half-sitting position.

"Sit back," he instructed his brother. He went to gather some instruments, and returned to lean over Raph and examine his face closely.

Under his brother's eyes, Raph shifted uncomfortably. Part of him wanted to hide away from the intense gaze, to not be seen. But then Donatello placed gentle fingers on either side of his face – for a moment they were the hands of a brother, not a doctor – and

suddenly Raph was hit by a powerful surge of delayed relief. He was really here. He was really out of that place. It was really over, and his family still wanted him back, and *Christ* but he'd missed them, all of them, so much.

Worry and relief warred for control over Donatello's face.

"Raphie…" And he actually smiled at the watery glare he received at the use of the dreaded nick-name. "It'll be alright. I'm going to get the stitches out, but I don't want you to try to talk right away, okay? We need to get some liquids down your throat." He picked up a sterilised pair of scissors from the tray beside the bed, and then he hesitated.

"It looks like there's a bit of infection, so this is probably going to hurt a little. Want me to give you a local?"

Raph shook his head sharply.

"Should have known," Don muttered under his breath. "Okay, hold still…" And with a precise *snip* at the first knot in the stitching, he set to work.

It had been so long since Raph had had the luxury of lying on a real bed that he would have dropped off to sleep then and there, if it weren't for the relentless sting of the wire sliding slowly from his flesh. He managed to keep himself silent as his brother worked, twitching only slightly when a stitch snagged against his skin. He kept his gaze firmly fixed somewhere over Don's left shoulder, unable to look him in the eye at such close quarters.

The sensation of bits of wire being pulled slowly out of his skin was beginning to make him feel slightly nauseous. More and more twisted pieces were piling up on the steel tray next to the bed, dropped there by Don's careful tweezers, and instead of relieved, Raph was starting to feel nervous. When the stitching was gone he would be expected to break his enforced silence. And he simply *didn't know what he could say* . Couldn't get his brain to form the words. Never his forte, the concept of stringing words together now

seemed completely alien to him. In the Battleshell, and heading into the Lair, he had watched his brothers' mouths as they spoke to him, to each other, and marvelled at the unthinking ease with which words came bubbling out, their lips and tongues shaping meanings he was sometimes too distracted to grasp.

He was glad that Don had given him a short reprieve with his orders not to put stress on his throat as soon as his mouth was opened. But soon…

What if he couldn't do it? What if he opened his mouth to speak, and nothing came out?

As the stitches were pulled, he felt himself starting to unravel.

Don removed one more short piece of wire, and dropped it on the tray. "That's all of it."

Raph cracked his mouth open just a fraction, and ran his dry tongue tentatively across his lips. He could taste old blood. Experimentally, he breathed in through his mouth and coughed a little at the unfamiliar sensation as the air got caught in the back of his throat.

"Remember what I said," Donatello admonished, placing a stern hand on Raph's shoulder. "Just take it easy. It's going to need disinfecting and bandaging. Your ankles and wrists, too…"

Raph nodded wearily. He thought that he was trying to act more tired than he really was, in order to escape from the questions and attention coming his way (he just *knew* that Leo and Mikey were right outside the lab, waiting for their turn with him), but the acting made him realise how exhausted he truly was. When he peered up at Don's face, as he returned to the bedside with some bandages, he realised that his brother looked just as exhausted as he was himself, if the bags under his eyes were anything to go by.

Raph wanted to thank him, somehow, but he still didn't want to speak, (*couldn't* speak?), and his body was beginning to shut itself

down for rest. *I'll just… deal with it later* , he surrendered, and let his eyes close. At this point, unconsciousness seemed the easiest option.

Don stayed quiet as he noticed Raph's descent into sleep. He was burning to question him about his imprisonment, partly from a genuine medical need-to-know, and partly from a decidedly non-medical worry; if he didn't know for certain what had been done to his brother, then his imagination was free to fill in the blanks.

When he finished bandaging the raw skin around Raph's wrists and ankles he took the opportunity to examine his brother more closely, while he wasn't awake to suffer any discomfort from his gaze. Don's eyes travelled over Raphael's skin. Small signs of his mistreatment were scattered all over it. He was just glad that so much of their bodies were covered by the protective shell and plastron, because there was barely an inch of exposed skin that was not unmarked. He noticed a few blemishes that looked different to the others, and turned them over in his mind analytically. They looked like… the marks of a whip. Old, and faded now, but…

Don resisted the sudden temptation to wake his brother up and… *And what? What exactly would I do?* He just felt that he hadn't managed to express to Raph just how worried he'd been, or how relieved that he was finally home, or how *angry* he was at the monsters who'd *dared* to hurt him, to keep him from his clan…

Don found that he was shaking (with fury, fear, relief?), a fine trembling in all of his limbs, and his eyes were suspiciously hot. He'd have to compose himself before he went out to talk with Leo and Mikey. He didn't want to scare them into thinking something was wrong.

Aside from the fact, of course, that our brother had been treated like a beast, he thought blackly. *Perhaps worse.*

He headed out of the room. Maybe later, once he'd talked to his Sensei and caught up on some missed sleep, he'd go a round with

Raph's punching bag.

A Different Kind of Cage

A/n: Finally!

Yeah, I've got a few notes here, bear with me:

1) Sorry for the wait. This was another chapter I found really difficult to write. Also, the real world decided it hadn't seen me for a while so it was a good idea to check in all at once. Hooray.

2) … And expect longer waits for upcoming chapters, too. Sorry again. I need to take some time to figure out where this story is going and how it's going to get there.

3) Thanks to kyt for the comments/feedback on this chapter!

4) Reviews continue to be a godsend. THANKYOU!

Chapter 12 – A Different Kind of Cage

Raphael awoke without opening his eyes. No point, when he wouldn't even be able to see the bars of his own cage in the pitch-blackness. He wondered if he would get water today, or if they'd forgotten – the bucket had been empty for a while now, and he was thirsty. The empty ache in his stomach was back, too.

Hang on… he couldn't feel the drip in his arm. And he was lying stretched out – he didn't have room to do that in the cage. How…?

It was the softness of the bed underneath him and the faint, familiar scent of his home that brought the memory of last night back to him. He still didn't crack open his eyelids, half afraid to find it was another one of his screwed-up dreams.

But as the minutes ticked by and the blankets around him didn't morph back into cold steel and chains, he began to accept it. And as he settled into his environment, he began to sense a still presence beside him. Fairly certain he knew who it was – he only had one brother who could sit still for this long without fidgeting – he opened his eyes to see Leonardo.

Leo, not lying on a rain-spattered, red-tinged roof with Raph's sai impaled in his throat, but here, whole, alive, and Raph found himself obscurely relieved. He'd dreamed the former image so many times that the Leo he saw now (not meditating, but just staring blankly at the wall across from the bed) was a pleasant shock.

Raph must have made some movement or tiny sound, because Leo's eyes snapped down to his face. Suddenly animated, he leaned forward in his chair and grasped Raph's shoulder.

"You're awake! How do you feel?"

Raphael opened his mouth…

And froze.

"Wait, don't answer that," Leo pressed on distractedly, not noticing Raph's strained silence. "Don says you need to drink this. Just a little bit, or you'll upset your stomach." He lifted a glass from the bedside table. "Can you -?"

Raph struggled up out of the blankets before Leo could help him to sit upright. He scratched absently at the bandage around his right wrist – he could feel the skin beginning to scab over beneath the wrapping. He made himself stop when he noticed Leo's eyes following the movement with unmasked anguish. Always such a stoic with his own battle wounds, Leo tended to fall apart at the first sign or reminder of another being hurt. To distract him, Raph reached over and plucked the drink from his hands. He sniffed at it, wanting to make sure it wasn't some disgusting tea or vitamin drink. It

smelled vaguely fruity. Trying to ignore Leo's watchful eyes, he took the wide straw carefully between his tender lips, and sipped.

The *taste* . Shell, he'd almost forgotten he had taste buds. He held the liquid in his mouth for a moment, savouring it on his tongue, before he let it slide in a cool wave down his dry throat. It felt ridiculously fantastic, and he let out a small groan of appreciation as his eyes fluttered closed.

Leo's voice interrupted his bliss.

"God, Raph… I'm so *sorry* . We… we looked everywhere, it was – " he didn't stop even when Raph opened his eyes to glare at him. Leo was staring down at his hands, twisting the bed sheets between them. "I'm just… I'm sorry it took so long for us to find you, I – "

"Leo," said Raph without thinking, "shut up."

As soon as the words left his mouth he felt something turn over inside him in shock, and he stared at his brother with wide eyes. His voice had been rough, uncertain. Unfamiliar. But *there* . He clenched his hands around the cup.

There was more to be said, here. He should elaborate on just why Leo should shut up and stop apologising, but they'd had conversations about Leo's guilt trips in the past, and that hadn't seemed to work. He should say thankyou, say how much of a relief it was to feel that big-brother presence beside him again, but there was no way in hell he'd admit that, even if he could find the right words. He should apologise for that night, for what he'd done over and over in his dreams. *No, he couldn't.* He couldn't say any of those things, so instead he tried to ask the other question that had occurred to him. It took him a while to form the thought out loud.

"H-how… how long…?" The rasping sound of his own voice distracted him again, and he couldn't finish the question. Leo seemed to know what he was asking anyway, and answered without hesitation, in a dark voice:

"One month and seventeen days."

Not like he's been counting , was Raph's knee-jerk sarcastic response, before he let the number sink into his brain. Those were weeks of his life he was not going to get back. *One month and seventeen days* . Leo was watching him carefully for his reaction, so he gazed down into the cup between his hands. He couldn't decide – it felt shorter than that. It felt longer than that. It felt like a lifetime. He couldn't make the number fit. And now he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Drink just a little more," Leo urged eventually, to break the silence. Then he cracked as much of a smile as he could manage. "You'll need your strength. I think Mikey's got visiting rights next."

Raph couldn't remember how to smile back.

When Mikey came in to see Raph he was sitting up in bed, rubbing at his bandaged wrists. He didn't look up, and Mikey, for once in his life, didn't say anything. He crossed the room, ignoring the chair that Leo had left at the bedside. With a silent sense of purpose, he sat on the edge of the bed, leaned over, and wrapped his arms around Raph. He felt his brother flinch and go tense in his embrace, but he couldn't bring himself to let go for a few seconds. Raph was *here* , much the worse for wear and obviously uncomfortable, but Mike could feel the solid, rough texture of his shell underneath his hands, and the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

He was *here* . No longer a tiny missing blip in an enormous city teeming with life, an empty chair at the table, an absence. He was here, and so everything would fall back into place again. Mike tried very hard to believe that it would be that easy.

When he realised that Raphael wasn't going to say anything or make any movement to return the tight hug, he made himself pull back a little and rest his hands on Raph's shoulders.

"Oh, man," he breathed, drinking in the sight of his brother's face, "you have *no idea* how good it is to see you." Raph stared at him. "Don't look at me like that. It's true. Sight for sore eyes, dude."

Raph still didn't speak, and Mikey realised that his eyes weren't actually focused on his face, but watching his mouth.

"Raph?" Mikey prompted. He ducked his head a little, trying to meet his gaze. "Are you… ya know… are you alright?"

Raph opened his mouth, and a pause stretched between them. "… Yeah. 'M… 'M'okay."

Yes! He speaks! Mikey crowed triumphantly in his mind.

Raph was rubbing at his wrists again. He didn't seem to be aware that he was doing it. Impulsively, Mike reached down and stopped his hands. Raph looked down in surprise.

"You probably shouldn't do that," said Mikey, trying to keep his voice even.

"Sorry." Raph coughed a bit. "S'just…"

"…What?"

Raph looked at him, strangely helpless. Mike wished he could read his brother's eyes like a comic book. Maybe there were answers buried in there, beneath the layers of frustration and confusion.

"I gotta…" Raph let that sentence trail off as well, and suddenly pushed up off the bed, brushing past Mike without looking at him, walking quickly from the room, and trying not to run.

Mikey had long ago acknowledged his own tendency to morph into a parasitic limpet and attach himself to whoever he was worried about, so he knew not to follow Raph at moments like these, no matter how much he wanted to. Instead he sat back on the bed, and absent-mindedly wrapped his arms around himself.

Yeah. Didn't think it would be that easy .

Raphael stalked down the corridor, trusting to luck that he wouldn't bump into any other family members on the way to the bathroom. He went in and fumbled the door shut behind him. As soon as the lock clicked into place he felt uncomfortable in the small, tiled space. The walls pressed in around him.

Godamnit. No. He would *not* open it again. Claustrophobia wasn't too high a price to pay for a few moments of privacy. He squeezed his eyes shut and made a vague motion to push the walls back with his hands. His movements felt strange, uncoordinated; like someone had taken him apart and then pieced him together again with everything just a little off-kilter.

He was just getting used to things again, that was all , he reassured himself. Getting used to controlling his limbs again, and knowing what date it was, and being able to just walk out of a room when the pressure got too much.

Speaking.

And being *heard* .

They listened as if his mumbled words meant something, but he wasn't *enough* …

He placed a hand on either side of the basin, leaning forward and squinting at himself in the mirror. What he saw, the twisted, scarred green face, naked without his mask, teeth clenched… It infuriated him, and for a moment he felt the animalistic urge to attack his cold glass opposite, rip into its ugly face with teeth and claws and irrational rage.

He tightened his hands around the sink. *No* . He was in control now.

The walls loomed inward again, as if trying to prove him wrong. With a growl, he pushed off from the sink and spun around, going to the door. He almost ripped the doorknob off in his haste to get it unlocked and open.

What is this shit? His old voice grumbled at him as he stumbled back down the corridor. *You runnin' away from the walls, now?*

A low growl escaped his throat. *No!* He would not be ruled by his instincts. He was better than that. By the time he emerged into the central chamber of the lair he had managed to slow his footsteps and his breathing by force of will. Still, he couldn't control or ignore the burst of relief at the wide space and the high, arching ceiling.

His family were nowhere to be seen. Finally sleeping, perhaps? His eyes roved over the lair, and his aimless footsteps led him past the couch and into the kitchen.

The clock ticked. The refrigerator hummed. Dirty dishes were piled up in a sink. There was an old family photo stuck up with magnets on the fridge, and on the wall next to it was a calendar.

One month and seventeen days , he thought again, looking at it.

" *Mew* ." A small ball of orange fluff wound about his legs. He looked down in surprise.

"Hey, cat." His voice cracked quietly as he made a conscious effort to speak. He bent down, wincing as his aching muscles were pulled, to rub Klunk's ears. "Reckon I met yer big cousin the other day."

" *Mew* ." Klunk looked up at him with amber eyes.

Suddenly, Raph felt he had to sit down. He slumped at the kitchen table and rested his head in his hands, wearily. Klunk came to lean against his legs, then jumped up to curl in his lap. He was glad no one else was around to watch if his shoulders shook; just quietly, just for a few minutes.

It was all he would allow.

Suspension

Chapter 13 – Suspension

The door to his room creaked open when Raphael pushed on it. He stood in his doorway and looked in. It was untouched, as messy as he'd left it all those weeks ago. But he no longer felt a sense of ownership over the place. It was deserted, abandoned. He stepped inside.

The previous owner of the room had liked bikes; there were a few posters on the otherwise bare walls. Elbow and kneepads were strewn all over the floor, and a blanket was tossed haphazardly over the hammock. *His* hammock. He could sleep in it now, there was no reason to stay in Don's little hospital. And it would be a hell of a lot better than curling up in mouldy straw in the cold basement of some hellhole…

His presence in the room felt awkward, intrusive. He jumped when he heard a light tapping on the doorframe, feeling like he'd been caught red-handed in some place he shouldn't be. He spun around guiltily to see Mike, who was carrying something carefully, almost reverently, in two hands. He came forward into the room.

"Thought you might like these back."

It was his sai, and his mask. The sight of them jolted him painfully – familiar things seemed the hardest for him to bear right now. They reminded him of how far he'd fallen, and how fast. *How could they have remained the same when he had been forced to change so much?* Mike seemed to know that he couldn't take them for himself just yet, so he placed the bundle on the small table next to the hammock. Raph cleared his throat experimentally.

"How'd you get 'em?"

Mikey looked encouraged at the sound of his voice. "Found them in the storeroom of a warehouse on the docks. Must have been the place where they first nabbed you, I guess. They were how we knew we were in the right place to start looking, actually. First breadcrumb on the trail."

Raphael hadn't really thought about how his family had tracked him down. And with everything that had happened since, he'd almost forgotten that first night on the docks, and the man (he'd never even known his name) who'd bartered his life away to Darmonaz. Sold him, like cattle. That's where it had all started. He felt flushed with shame suddenly, and couldn't meet his brother's eyes.

Mike seemed to realise that he'd said something wrong, but he didn't know what else to do. He couldn't just talk to Raph as if nothing had happened. He'd seen all the places, searched through the stockrooms and abandoned buildings and dim basements, the dirty cages… he could hardly imagine how much worse it would have been to be kept there. He knew it must have been bad. (Especially because it was *Raph*). Pretending he was perfectly fine was not going to achieve anything. Mike knew Raph would try to bury it all, if he could.

His little brother didn't plan on letting him. He knew that method never worked.

"I know you don't wanna talk about it," he began, but Raph cut him off with a sharp movement of his hand.

"I don't wanna *talk* about *any* thin'." He turned his back on his brother and stared down at the steel of his sai, all tangled up in red cloth. He couldn't see it, but he could picture the small, hurt look that would be on Mikey's face right now. He couldn't give him the right words to take it away. (*He'd never known the right words*). So after a few seconds Mikey mumbled an excuse and left the room, quietly. Raph didn't turn around to watch him go.

Good on ya , he snarled at himself *. They've been trackin' you fer over a month and yer not home two days before ya start hurting them. Brilliant.*

His mind led him to the logical conclusion. *They shoulda left me there* .

He knew they'd yell at him if he mentioned that thought out loud, denying it and telling him firmly that he was being an idiot. Heck, maybe they'd be right.

So he wouldn't speak it out loud. He'd keep the words nestled inside, keep them close, keep them silent.

Splinter settled his robes more deeply around himself, then wrapped his hands around the warm comfort of his tea cup once more. Normally at this time of the morning his sons would be just beginning their training in the dojo. But normal life had not yet come out of suspension, and so Splinter would let his family sleep. However, when he heard the light tapping at his door, he was not entirely surprised.

"Come in, Leonardo."

Leo entered, the steam rising from his own early morning cup of tea.

"Good morning, Sensei," he murmured, moving to kneel before him on the mat. Splinter noted that his eldest's face did not wear its usual expression of calm focus. Something was bothering him, and it was not difficult to guess what.

"Have you slept, my son?"

"A little," Leo answered distractedly. His eyes were still weary, but Splinter supposed it would take more than one night to catch up on all the rest he'd skipped since his brother had gone missing. Leo

turned the tea cup in his hands, staring into its depths as though searching for answers in there.

"I checked in on Raph when I woke up. He's sleeping in his room, even though I think Donnie still wanted him in the lab where he could keep an eye on him… He was a bit restless, so I sat with him for a while, but I left before he woke up, because… well, you know how Raph feels about people watching him sleep. I just… It doesn't seem real. That he's back, I mean. I was beginning to think… What if we'd lost him for good? What if they'd shipped him overseas, and we just never saw him again, never even knew what happened…"

Splinter waited until Leonardo had let all his fears out into the open, his voice winding down. Then, calmly, he pointed out: "They did not." He paused to let that statement settle.

"My son, you must not fixate on what could have been. You have found him, and thanks to your leadership, he is home. That is the most important thing."

Leo bowed his head. "Yes, Master. I know you're right." He let out a sigh. "I just wish that we could have found him sooner. What Casey described…" His hands balled into fists, resting on his knees. "Don said they must have done that to him almost every night. I don't… I don't know what to do, father."

Splinter closed his eyes for a moment, hiding his own pain behind them. When he opened them again, they were clear, and he spoke calmly. "I see you already fear that your brother will take his experiences to heart, as he has always done. Do you think he will wish to speak of them?"

"I think that's even *less* likely than it usually is, with Raph. Don said it might take him a while to be comfortable with using his voice again."

"As I thought." Splinter nodded, as if coming to a decision. "We must not let him be controlled by what has been done to him. We must try to draw the poison from the wound, before the infection sets in."

Leonardo looked at him sceptically.

"I know," Splinter acknowledged, "that it will not be an easy task. But we must try. Raphael is too quick to believe the worst of himself. And with the lies that I suspect he has been force-fed during his captivity…"

Leo watched as his father's voice trailed off and his face darkened, almost frighteningly.

"… Master Splinter?"

His father's shining black eyes blinked once, then seemed to refocus on his face.

"I am sorry, Leonardo."

"… You don't have to apologise for being angry," Leo said, with a sudden certainty that surprised the both of them. *How nice it was to be sure about this one thing, at least* . "Raph wouldn't."

Splinter gave him a grim half-smile. "You are certainly right about that."

It was Donatello who next heard the quiet rap of knuckles against his door.

"Come in," he called softly, "I'm awake."

Leo pushed the door open with his shell, his hands busy with another cup of tea and a freshly-brewed mug of coffee for Don. He handed the latter over to his brother, who murmured an appreciative "Mmm, thanks," and settled back in the swivel chair in front of his computer. Leo sat on the edge of Don's unmade bed, leaning his forearms on his knees with a weariness that was not altogether physical.

"You don't stop, do you, Don?" he commented, eyeing the multiple windows and applications already open and running on the toolbar of the computer.

"I couldn't." Don rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "There were things that I needed to know. And I think that I've found the answers to some of them, at least."

Leo lifted his head, hopefully. Don caught his expression, and warned, "They're not exactly good things. I think it's just going to piss you off, really."

Leo set his jaw. "I want to know. Sock it to me, whatever it is."

"… Well, I'm pretty sure I know how Darmonaz was keeping undercover." Don swung his chair around to face his computer screen, not wanting to see his brother's face when he told him. "Animal charities. The World Wildlife Fund, the RSPCA, shell, even Greenpeace. He's on all the donation lists. He's got a reputation as a campaigner for animal rights. And apparently that's allowed him to avoid any questioning about his own activities."

Animal rights , Leo's mind repeated numbly. Behind his closed eyes he saw again the empty auditorium, the tiny, dark room where Raph's stitched face and battered body crouched behind the bars. Cold. Half-starved. *Animal rights? **Animal** rights?*

Something tugged at his fingers, and he realised that Don was rescuing the delicate tea cup from his death-grip on it. Don placed the cup carefully on his bedside table, then sat beside Leo on the edge of the bed.

"That's… unbelievable." Leo managed after a while.

"I know," Don said grimly. "There's got to be more to it, as well. I mean, I'm sure he'd be guilty of about ten types of fraud and forgery. He was hard enough to track down. All his donations just kept him in touch with the right people." His mouth twisted bitterly. "No one ever

suspects the charitable man." He turned his head to meet Leo's hard stare.

"We'll make him pay," Leo promised. "We'll make him regret he ever laid eyes on Raphael."

Don nodded, hearing the cold steel in his brother's voice, and allowing it to anchor him.

This man would no longer go unpunished. They would make sure of that.

Raph spent his first couple of days at home becoming intimately acquainted with the toilet bowl, as his digestive system re-learned how to function. Despite the worried looks his brothers gave him, they knew better than to try and aid him whenever he disappeared suddenly into the bathroom, and pretended not to hear his muffled retching noises. Just when Don was beginning to consider putting him back on an IV (or trying to, at least – *there's no way he'd let one of those things be stuck in his arm again*), something in his guts seemed to settle enough to let him keep light food down.

He spent most of his time on the couch in front of the television, not really watching, but unwilling to lock himself away in his room. He was half-aware of a having a brother or a father with him at all times, but as long as he didn't catch them staring at him, he didn't have the energy to chase them off. He was also subconsciously aware of the discussions going on behind the closed door of Don's lab, or in the kitchen when they thought he wasn't listening. He didn't care. If they wanted to know something, they would ask him. And then he'd probably refuse to answer. That was how it usually went.

What was there to tell, anyway? So he got a few bruises, a few extra ugly scars to add to the collection. So what? He hadn't even been significantly injured. It was nothing. He'd been through worse before.

In a lot of ways it would have been better if he'd been taken by the Foot. He was almost appalled at himself at the thought. To the Foot, he was a hated enemy. He would have been treated with dishonour, almost certainly. But in a twisted way (*a really, **really** twisted way* , he amended), the Foot's methods of dishonour were almost a sign of respect. To them, he was somebody worth hating in his own right.

In Darmonaz's little circus, the whole concept of honour had been completely wiped off the slate. It couldn't be measured in terms of material wealth, so it simply did not exist. In that world, Raphael was just an object with a price tag attached, a means to an end.

That was why he couldn't explain to his brothers what it had been like. They wouldn't understand. In the world of the circus, Raphael hadn't been a defeated warrior, hadn't been an enemy…

He'd been *nothing* .

Retribution

A/N:

Wow, it's been a while. I hope nobody thought that I'd abandoned this. Since I put up the last chapter I've:

- had to write final essays for my last semester of uni

- had my computer experience the Blue Screen of Death

- lost a close family friend to cancer

- re-thought the plot for the last few chapters of the story

- … And what feels like a million other things.

But now chapter 14 is here, and we're nearly at the finish line!

Big thanks to KameTerra for being my guinea pig reader for this chapter!

Please enjoy. I'm looking forward to hearing what people have to say about this part of the story. :)

(And I do hope there's no more stupid typos than usual; it's Silly O'Clock in the morning right now where I am).

Chapter 14 – Retribution

"Hey Don."

The keyboard clacked.

"Don."

Clack-clack.

"DONNY!"

His brother finally spun his chair to face him. "WHAT? I'm busy, Mike."

"I know. That's why we're going out. I want to talk to you, and you'll just get distracted if we stay here."

Don opened his mouth to argue, but Mike cut him off before he could speak. "You've been in here for days. We need supplies, and I figured April and Casey would probably appreciate a visit. Come on, *out* ." He grabbed the back of Don's computer chair and started wheeling him towards the door.

"Alright, alright!" Don gave in grudgingly. He recognized the determined look on his brother's face. He didn't see it there often, but when he did he knew he wouldn't get any peace until Mikey got what he wanted.

Leo was on the couch in front of the TV with Raph, supposedly reading the book that was open on his lap.

"Hey Leo, we're just ducking out for - " Don snapped his jaw shut at the warning look he received. Crap. He'd spoken carelessly. They'd agreed not to even mention going topside in front of Raph yet – he wasn't ready, wasn't healed enough. Now he was sure to jump up and run off and do something stupid… Don watched Raph tensely, but his brother didn't give any sign that he'd even heard. He remained motionless, staring at the television. There was an extremely awkward pause while his three brothers realized he wasn't going to say anything.

"Ooookay," said Mike, because someone had to break the silence. "Well, I guess we'll just be going, then." Leo dragged his puzzled gaze away from Raph's face to consider them. "Are you sure it's dark enough out?"

"Sunsets equal longer shadows," Don pointed out helpfully.

"… Alright. Don't be back too late."

"We won't!" Mike chirped over his shoulder, tugging Don out the door. "Sweet freedom," he breathed reverently as it shut behind him. Yes, it was good to get out of the lair. He couldn't figure out why Raph hadn't jumped at the chance. After spending so long stuck inside a cage the size of a small shower cubicle, Raph's stillness and silence was all the more bizarre. This new version of Raph unsettled him. Raphael had never been talkative, but before even his brooding silences had, in their own way, been as loud as the shouting. Now his silences were just... silent.

Mike scuffed the dirt under his feet as he walked, trying to make as much noise as possible. *Stop dwelling on this* , said the sensible voice in his brain. *Do what you came out here to do* .

He was running a little low on inspiration at the moment, so he couldn't figure out a way to do this that wasn't blunt. "So, Don. What have you and Leo been planning?"

Don started slightly, then tried to recover. "We haven't been planning anything! I've just been collecting some data and - "

"You're going after Darmonaz, aren't you." It wasn't really phrased as a question, and Don's silence as they walked confirmed it. "And when were you going to invite *me* on this little crusade?" Honestly, Mike wouldn't have really needed an invitation. He was there, whether they wanted him or not. But it stung a little to think they didn't believe he could handle it.

"We've just been keeping tabs on him," Don said defensively, as they came into the garage. "Are we driving?"

"Let's walk. And you're not convincing me. Did you really think I wouldn't be interested? He's my brother, too."

"Mike…" Don sighed. "Look, it's not going to be pretty." He peered outside in the gathering dusk to make sure the alley was empty, then started climbing up the fire escape.

"What happened to *Raph* wasn't pretty," Mike muttered darkly. "What are we going to do about it?"

Don didn't speak until they reached the rooftop, and waited until his brother was standing beside him. "We're going to teach him what it means to mess with us." It should have sounded melodramatic, but in Don's mild voice the statement was merely factual.

"Leo is gonna kill him," Mike said with satisfaction. And then something occurred to him. "Woah. *Is* Leo gonna kill him? Is that what this is about?"

Don looked away, and started moving across the rooftop. "I… don't know. We haven't really… discussed that part of it. Not that Darmonaz wouldn't deserve it…"

"For sure," Mikey agreed, his fingers drifting unconsciously to the 'chucks in his belt. "But… what does Raph think?"

"Um…" Don took a running leap for the next rooftop, landing neatly on the edge. "I don't know."

Mike followed him over. "No one's asked him?" Guilty silence. Mike continued. "You know that doesn't work, with Raph."

"I'm not letting him go back there again!" Don burst out with sudden heat. "I don't want Darmonaz to lay his filthy eyes on him ever again."

"I know. Doesn't change the fact that you have to tell Raph what you're planning."

Don didn't answer. They picked up the pace until they were running, and didn't speak again until they reached April and Casey's

apartment.

Raphael stepped slowly into the dojo and eyed the punching bag. He should want to do this. Shouldn't he? At any rate, he was getting sick of staring at the television and thinking of nothing. He hadn't been sleeping properly the past few nights, and he still felt kinda strange and hollowed out on the inside, but his muscle tone wasn't going to come back on its own.

He placed a palm against the worn surface of the bag. Okay. He could do this. He stretched both his arms out and rotated his wrists experimentally. The marks from the shackles had begun to fade, and the insides of his forearms showed no sign of needle marks.

He hit the bag, a few soft punches. Hmm. That felt okay, he supposed. Another couple of punches. Didn't this use to be a lot more… satisfying?

"Do you want to try with these?" Raph jumped and spun around to see Leo standing in the entrance. Shit, he was out of practice. Hadn't even heard him coming in. And now Leo was holding out Raph's sais toward him, carefully, respectfully. The image of Leo's broken swords chose that moment to flash through his mind, and the juxtaposition made his stomach clench.

He took the sais from Leo, avoiding his eyes. He hadn't really held them properly since he'd got back. The hilts still fit smoothly into his palm, a comforting weight. He hefted them a couple of times.

"Let's spar," said Leo. "Just a light one." He watched Raph hopefully. He'd actually missed sparring against him in the time he'd been gone.

"Okay," Raph accepted distractedly, still looking down at the weapons in his hands. Leo drew his swords and moved into the center of the dojo, standing at the ready. Raphael lifted his sais, and met Leo's eyes for the first time since he'd entered the room.

And suddenly, he couldn't move. Leo watched him, calm and focused, waiting for him to make the first attack. All Raph could see was the faint beat of the pulse at Leo's throat. The nightmare was starting again, in slow motion, but quickly gaining speed, colour and depth. The same throat torn open by his own claws, the blood spilling out, the rush of triumph, the sickening realisation…

His sais clattered to the floor, dropped from nerveless fingers.

When Don and Mikey returned, they found their brothers still in the dojo. Raph was sitting hunched up on a bench against the wall, staring down at his hands. Leo was sitting nearby, but not too close, watching Raph out of the corner of his eye. He looked up as they came in.

"How were April and Casey?"

"They're good," Mikey replied, "waiting for a visit from you, Raph, actually." Raph looked up at this, and Mikey felt a small thrill of victory. They'd all been tip-toeing around him for too long. "Donnie and I had a talk on the way there." He ploughed on recklessly, ignoring Don's hissed protest, "and we figured it's about time we did something about this Darmonaz guy."

Mikey stepped back, folded his arms, and watched his magic at work. Sometimes it was like watching a car crash in slow motion, but occasionally he got results just by putting things out there.

All of the eyes in the room swung onto Raph as he gathered himself to speak. When he eventually opened his scarred mouth, none of his brothers were expecting to hear the words that came out.

"What makes ya think," he said slowly, "that somethin' can be 'done' about him?"

Leo shared a glance with Don, who took a step closer to Raph. "Surely you know that I've been keeping tabs on him, Raph. We can't

let him keep doing what he's doing."

"So you were gonna go… what, 'teach him a lesson'? 'Zat it?" He laughed, but there was no humour in the sound.

"We can't just sit back and do nothing, bro."

"Not after what he did," Mikey cut in fiercely.

Raph felt pinned beneath the combined weight of their gaze. He could almost feel the waves of puzzlement and concern rolling off them.

They really just didn't get it. He didn't even fully get it himself, but he could feel it in his gut. He had to make them understand; they couldn't go back. They could only go forward.

"No," he told them with as much force as he could muster. "Yer not going. It's too dangerous. He doesn't need ta know that there's more than just one giant walking turtle out there."

This was not the bloodthirsty urge for revenge that Leo had been expecting. He'd thought that Raph would jump on the idea with enthusiasm. He'd only been holding back from telling him out of a lingering concern for the physical injuries he'd suffered. His mind working fast, he tried to frame his words in his Reasonable Voice.

"Okay, that's obviously not the *real* reason. Or at least not the only reason. Why don't you want us to go after him?"

Raph ignored the question. "What are ya gonna do, anyway, huh? You gonna kill him? Fer what?" He snorted. "Fer bein' *human* ?"

Leo couldn't answer. He didn't quite know himself what he was intending to do to Darmonaz. He hadn't allowed himself to think of it too much. (This conversation was revealing far too many gaps in his plans). He considered it. Would he kill Darmonaz? Could he hold a

katana blade to the man's neck, look him in the eye, and kill him in cold blood?

Yes , his mind supplied him without too much hesitation. He'd been over that edge before.

Raph must have seen the answer in his eyes. He was beginning to feel vaguely desperate. "You kill him, and you prove him right about me. About what I am. It's exactly what he would *expect* from a… a… and I won't let him turn you into one, too."

"You're a freakin' *hero* , bro. He can't change that." Mike said stubbornly.

Don's voice was harsh. "He'll get what he *deserves* , that's the important thing."

While they were speaking, Raph had begun to pace. "It's not – you can't just – it doesn't *work* like that!" This was already far more words than he'd strung together in a long, long time, and they were taking their toll.

"Work like what?" Don prompted, and flinched when Raph spun around to smack a fist into the punching bag.

"There ain't no *point* ." The energy seemed to drain out of him, leaving him calm. He spoke as if realizing something for the first time. "Revenge won't work here. He's not… He's not ever gonna see the 'error of his ways'. He knew exactly what he was doin', and he didn't give a shit. 'N I don't…" his voice died somewhere in his throat, and he took a while to dredge it up again. His brothers all seemed to be holding their breath, unwilling to interrupt the flow of words. He kept his face turned away, unable to say this and look at them at the same time.

"If we go after him ourselves, it's like… he's still in control. Still defining me." He let out a breath as the realization hit him. Can't go

backwards, can only move forwards. "I can't keep doin' that. I can't keep doin' what he wants, I can't keep playin' his game. I can't…"

He made himself face them. "You gotta let it go."

He was pleading with them now; Leo could see it. Could he let it go? Leo prodded his emotions, searching for the truth before he would allow himself to answer.

"We can't just walk away from this. He needs to be dealt with -"

"So let the cops do their own job for once." Raph suddenly felt tired, right down to his bones. The spout of words was running dry, but he felt like he was starting to get through to them. "Just let it go… *Please* ."

There was a long pause.

"… If that's what you want," said Leo.

Later, Leo quietly entered Don's room. One corner of his mouth lifted grimly when he realised that Mike was already in there, and Don had the maps open and running on his computer.

"Where is he now?" he murmured, coming to lean over Don's shoulder.

"He's out of town, at the moment. But I'm sure he'll be back."

"So he still hasn't found that tracker you left on the cage?"

"Nope," said Don with satisfaction.

"This is frustrating." Mikey flopped back onto Don's bed with a sigh. "We can watch him, but we can't touch him. I don't get it. *Why* ?"

"It's what Raph needs," said Leo, trying not to sound half-hearted. "What exactly have we got on this guy, Don? What can we pass on

to the cops?"

"Enough to get him put away for a good long time. He's the typical underground businessman, a finger in every pie. At the very least, once the NGOs get wind of what he's done, he'll be out of the animal trafficking scene for good."

Don tapped away at the keys for a few seconds.

"Is that *enough* for you, Leo?" Mike had sat back up on the bed and was now fixing his eldest brother with a knowing gaze. The kind you couldn't escape from – or lie to.

Don stopped his tapping. Leo shook his head once, slowly.

"Didn't think so," said Mikey. "Me neither."

"What else can we *do* ?" asked Don in frustration.

"I think I might have an idea," Leo said, almost reluctantly. "It's still not enough, but it's… something." He turned to Don. "You have a contact number for Darmonaz in your files, right?"

Don looked at him for a second, his eyes beginning to gleam. Then he spun to face his computer and quickly dragged up the required information. Mikey came to stand behind Don's other shoulder, and the three of them silently contemplated the short string of numbers on the screen.

They gathered in Don's lab. Splinter was keeping Raphael busy with meditation in his chambers. Leo had thought that his Sensei would want to be present for the phone call – parental anger was a powerful force. In the end, though, Splinter had said that he would occupy Raphael while the call was made. "I trust my sons will be… thorough." He had said, his eyes glinting. Perhaps Splinter had known that his own anger could only be matched by that of three brothers united. Or perhaps, Leo thought, Splinter had decided that

this was just one more of those things that they had to do for themselves.

Either way, they were ready. Leo had quashed his guilt about doing this behind Raph's back – after all, Raph hadn't asked them not to *talk* to the man, and anyway (Leo rationalized) Don and Mikey needed this. And of course, he did too. Leo was not above recognizing his own selfish purposes. For himself – for Mikey and Don – this was something that *had* to be done.

They'd decided beforehand on what they would say. They couldn't afford to spend too long on the line, in case Darmonaz got suspicious and decided to make a run for it. In any case, Don had reassured Leo, he'd sent all his data to the police and they would be on Darmonaz within a couple of hours. They just had this small window of time.

Don set the phone on loudspeaker, and taking one last look at his brothers' grim faces, dialed in the number. The phone rang once.

Twice.

Three times. There was a click at the other end.

"Hello?"

Leo had thought he was ready, but the sound of the man's voice, suddenly so close and real, spiked through his mental armour. What lies had Raphael heard spoken in that voice, what insults and abuse?

It was Mikey who spoke first, and a small corner of Leo managed to be proud at the steadiness of his brother's voice, its veneer of professionalism.

"Is this Mr. Darmonaz?" Mike said smoothly.

"It may be," the voice on the other end of the line cackled cautiously. "Whom am I speaking to?"

"Mr. Darmonaz, I have some enquiries about your recent show. I attended not too long ago, and found myself fascinated by your… main attraction." It didn't show through in his tone, but Mike's eyes were beginning to narrow.

"Ah, yes, the turtle monster," said Darmonaz, gaining some enthusiasm. Mikey's face froze in fury, and he turned away from the phone, unable to continue without giving himself away. Don took over, his fists clenched by his sides. He didn't bother disguising his voice.

"Were you *aware* that the 'creature' you were torturing has a name?"

"… Excuse me?" Darmonaz's voice was cold again.

"You heard me the first time, you despicable excuse for a human being."

(That wasn't quite following the script, Leo reflected, but he'd let it slide).

Mikey spoke out of turn. "How *dare* you call him a monster," (and Leo had never seen the blue of Mikey's eyes so bitingly cold), "It's you who's the monstrous one here, you piece of – "

"What is the meaning of this?" Darmonaz blustered. Mike and Don both opened their mouths to answer, but Leo spoke first, determined to keep this under control.

"Listen to me very closely, Mr. Darmonaz." He spoke each word slowly and precisely. "I will only say this once. We will be watching you. If you ever harm another living creature again, we will know about it. And we *will* make you regret it."

"Are you threatening me, sir?"

"Yes," said Leo simply.

Darmonaz sounded outraged. "This is just – who – how did you get this number?"

The steel in Leonardo's voice was the closest that Darmonaz would ever come to his katana blades, so Leo tried to make it count. "What you did to him was unforgivable."

And now Darmonaz was starting to sound just a little afraid. "Look, who the hell is this?!"

Leo exchanged a glance with his brothers.

"Monsters," he said, and immediately disconnected the line.

Absolution

A/n: I've convinced myself that the long wait for this chapter was in fact necessary, as it needed time to stew in its own juices. I've had bits of it written for months and months, (you know that wonderful feeling when paragraphs pop into your head fully-formed and without needing any revision), and there are bits that needed some major work. I guess this chapter is pretty much the reason I wrote this story in the first place, so I'm excited to get to it. Of course, with that kind of hype, it certainly won't live up to my own expectations, but I hope you guys enjoy it anyway.

Really big thanks go out again to KameTerra for giving me feedback on this chapter. If you haven't already, go give her stories some love!

This is the last chapter before the epilogue!

Oh, and **warning** for disturbing imagery, I guess.

Chapter 15 – Absolution

Raphael faced Leonardo across the dojo floor.

"C'mon, Raph, let's spar," Leo wheedled. "You need the practice."

"Alright," Raph growled reluctantly, "but just… be careful."

A gentle laugh. "It's you who needs to be careful, little brother."

Raph clamped down on his anxiety, and raised his sais to a ready position. He took a deep breath. Nothing happened – no hallucination of blood and pain, no pleading eyes, just his brother standing there, ready for him, swords waiting. Okay, maybe he could handle this spar after all. The hilts of the sais felt comfortable in his hands. Natural.

They began to circle each other watchfully. Leo made the first probing attack when he realised that Raph wasn't going to, and the sais responded instinctually. The sound of steel on steel seemed to awaken something in the younger turtle, and he began to work his way closer under Leo's defences, his movements becoming more aggressive.

Then everything tilted, just a bit.

"I'm better than you," said Leo quietly. His mouth hadn't moved, but Raph had heard his voice. He fumbled a manoeuvre slightly in shock, and now Leo was advancing on him.

"You call that an attack?" His words echoed around the dojo again, and again his mouth had remained closed.

"What the hell?" Raph tried to say, but found he couldn't speak. He was panting for breath now, gradually being backed into the wall. Cornered.

He knew. He knew what was going to happen.

He made one desperate attempt to throw his sais to the floor but it felt like the handles had melted and fused to his hands.

Cornered. Fight. Kill. *No!*

Yes.

He snarled around his fangs, and suddenly it was Leo who was retreating, barely holding his own against the vicious whirlwind of claws and teeth that his brother had become.

"Raph, wait!" Now he was speaking normally again, but Raphael no longer understood the words.

Harsh breathing. Then…

The screech of broken swords.

He was liquid power as he landed a kick that sent Leo spinning to the ground. Raph was quickly on top of him, his sai stabbing down an inch from his throat.

He looked down to meet his brother's wide, confused eyes.

He smiled.

And then he drew the sharpened point across the throat, swiftly and forcefully.

Raph felt Leo's body jerk and twitch under his own as the blood spurted from the ragged gash in his throat, which was making a horrible gurgling noise. Raphael could not look away from his eyes – could do nothing, feel nothing, as the body beneath him weakened and its thrashing movements gradually slowed. He held it down with his own weight, his expression detached and practical, until it was utterly still.

Now Leo's eyes were glassy, and there was a widening pool of ruby liquid on the floor. The air was thick with its coppery scent, cloying his nostrils. Raphael dipped his fingers into the warm blood, rubbed it all over his hands, and felt a deep, primal satisfaction.

There was a voice inside of him, faint, but gradually getting louder.

No, no, no, Leo, no, oh God, no, Leo Leo ***Leo*** *…*

The voice choked over the silent words, but couldn't seem to stop, and soon it was screaming inside his head.

His mouth was stitched again, and the walls of the dojo were rapidly shrinking in towards him. The roof came down until it was pressing against his head, forcing him to hunch over. He tried to push back at it but there were chains wrapped around his arms, around his ankles, the walls were no longer brick but cold metal bars pressing into his flesh, and he was being pushed down into the puddle of Leo's *blood* …

He jerked awake in his hammock, fighting desperately against the blankets tangled around his body. His breath punched in and out of his lungs in huge, sobbing gasps. In the darkness he could still feel the walls pressing in on him, so he propelled himself out of the hammock and staggered over to hit the light switch. The illumination revealed the walls to be as unmoving as usual. He pressed a hand to his mouth, frantically feeling for stitching that wasn't there. Now he could feel something wet on his lips. He looked down.

There was blood on his hands, glinting in the light. And now he could *taste* it.

Raphael ran.

He made it as far as the main room of the lair before he tripped on the edge of the rug in front of the couch and tumbled ungracefully to the ground, heart thumping in wild panic. He felt like he hadn't quite woken up from the nightmare – the blood, the walls – he needed to get *out* .

Light flooded over him suddenly as the main lights of the lair switched on.

"…Raph? What are you doing?"

Leo. Of course it had to be Leo who found him here like this, sprawled out on the floor and scrabbling to get up. He forced himself to speak, though it sounded nothing like his own voice. "Out. Gotta get out."

Leo jumped silently down to the main level, appraising the situation. He must have noticed the wild look in his brother's eyes, because he didn't immediately refuse. "Okay, but I'm going with you," he said, in a tone that suggested he was preparing for an argument.

"Right," Raphael rasped distractedly, "whatever, let's *go* ." He'd made it up off the rug by this point, and now he began to run to the exit, not really caring if Leo was keeping up.

Out in the tunnels, the sound of their breath and their running feet bounced off the walls and echoed, making Raph feel even more claustrophobic. *Something was chasing him* . He ran faster. Apart from the sounds of his pursuit, Leo was blessedly silent.

They burst out into the alleyway, but Raphael didn't even pause, clattering straight up the fire escape without losing any speed.

"Raph," Leo hissed at the noise, but his brother didn't seem to be listening.

He flung himself onto the rooftop with a gasp like he was coming up for air after being trapped underwater. He crossed the roof and leaned heavily on the ledge opposite, his head tilted back to take in the sky. The feeling of being closed in finally began to ease, but only slightly. No matter how fast he ran or how close to the sky he climbed, he knew he couldn't escape it completely. The residual horror of the dream clung to him stubbornly, despite the light breeze that blew across the rooftops, making his skin shiver in relief at the touch of the open air.

Raph could sense Leo approaching cautiously behind him, and could feel the weight of concern in those watchful eyes. When he came to Raph's side he made a small, truncated movement, as if he had been about to lay a hand on his shoulder but then thought better of it. Instead he leaned next to Raph on the low stone wall.

Raph's breathing gradually began to slow to a more normal rate. He ignored the little sideways glances that Leo kept slipping him from the corner of his eye, obviously trying not to be caught staring.

"… Damn," huffed Raph eventually, when his stupidity had sunken in. Why the hell had he let Leo follow him up there? He was the *last* person Raph wanted to deal with right now.

"Damn what?" asked Leo. "What happened?" Then his eyes moved to Raph's hands and widened when he noticed the blood. Raph's wrist was caught carefully but firmly, his half-formed protests easily

ignored while Leo examined the knuckles. "Nightmare," Leo said in dawning understanding. "You had a nightmare. Geez, Raph, you must have been bleeding all over your walls again. You should get Don to look at that in the morning."

It's yours , Raph wanted to say. *The blood, it's yours* . He tugged his wrist out of Leo's hands.

Apparently, though, Leo wouldn't let the matter go that easily.

"Did you dream about Darmonaz?"

Raph wouldn't look at him. "Not exactly. Or, maybe it was. I don't even know any more. Just had to get outside." It was his first time out since he'd been in captivity, with the exception of that one short trip between his cage and the Battleshell, and the sky still seemed alarmingly vast and alien. Unfamiliar.

"If the police weren't after him right now," Leo growled to himself, "I'd _ "

"Don't. Just leave it."

The weary acceptance in Raph's voice seemed to spark off something in Leo, and the next second he was lashing out in frustration.

"Why can't you just be *angry* ?"

The unspoken question hung in their air between them: W *hy can't you just be the brother I knew?* Subconsciously, Raph knew that Leo had been waiting and waiting for the inevitable explosion of his anger, and its absence had left his brother on edge.

But Raph was glad that Leo was angry. It was like he knew that Raph couldn't take the anger for himself just yet, so he was guarding it for him until he could reclaim it. If Leo was angry, then it meant *he* didn't have to be.

"Why should I be angry?" he asked, perfectly reasonable.

"Why should you — ?" Leo looked at him in sheer disbelief, then threw his hands in the air. "Because it's not *fair* ! Because no one *deserves* what happened to you! Because they had *no right* to do what they did!"

Leo sounded like he was yelling past a growing lump in his throat, and Raph heard him swallow before taking a couple of deep, slow breaths, obviously trying to get himself under control. When he next spoke his voice was quiet and unsteady, his eyes suspiciously damp. "God, Raph… why *shouldn't* you be angry?"

Raph still hadn't looked at him directly throughout his explosion. His gaze was turned out over the lights of the city.

"I had these dreams," he said very slowly, "when I was in there."

He couldn't really believe that he was saying the words out loud, and he let the haze of unreality wash over him so that he could continue speaking.

"It was like that night on the rooftop. The Winters thing. I was an animal. I… killed you. Every time. Over and over." He was shaking now. "I couldn't stop myself. Fuck, Leo, there was so much blood, and I didn't even *care* , I just…"

"Raph, stop!" Leo cut him off, horrified. "Don't say things like that. It doesn't matter what they did to you, you're not an *animal* . You're my brother. And I trust you – remember?" He took Raph firmly by the upper arms, giving him a little shake for emphasis, and forced him to meet his eyes. "Always have. Always will."

"You shouldn't." Raph pulled away again. He felt sickened, like he wanted to crawl out of his own skin. How could Leo even bare to touch him? He spun to put his shell to the wall (with perhaps more force than necessary), and sank down until he was sitting with his knees drawn up to his chest. Leo joined him, persistent.

"They lied to you. Whatever they told you, whatever they said about you, it's not true. They don't know you."

"Sure," Raph agreed tonelessly. "If they actually knew about all the things I've done, they woulda hated me even more."

Leonardo, of course, had never known when to quit, and now he pressed on stubbornly.

"They don't know the lengths you'd go to in order to protect your family. Or how you strive to protect the world even when it's ugly, even when – when it seems beyond saving. They don't know any of that." He clenched his fists. "They don't know that you came back for me that night. That you'd always come back for me, no matter how much of an ass I'd been. Just like I'd always come after you. No matter what."

And quite suddenly, Raphael felt overwhelmed. He rested his forehead against his knees, blocking out the world in a shaky attempt to gather himself. He didn't look up, but after a while he managed to squeeze out some words through a throat that was painfully tight. "That was one heckuva speech. You been practicin'?

Leo laughed softly, and Raph felt the tension break. He could feel the warmth of his brother's shoulder where it bumped against his.

"Nope. Just telling it like it is. Now stop being such an idiot and thinking you deserved what happened like some kind of stupid punishment, or something."

Raph glanced at him in surprise.

"Oh, come on," Leo snorted. "It's not like that was hard to predict. I *know* you."

… Damn. Now he felt kinda sheepish. He should have guessed that Leo would figure it out. Leo was too good at blaming himself for things to not recognise the same attitude in his brother. This was

different though – this time he really *had* deserved everything that had happened to him, and more. Didn't Leo understand that?

He almost didn't want to know the answer, but he had to ask.

"Were you… scared? The night I… Uh. The night of the Winters thing."

"Not really. I was… startled. Honestly, things were happening too fast for me to be scared."

Raph snorted like he didn't believe him, and Leo spoke again. "I was scared afterwards, though. A little. But I was scared *for* you. Not *of* you."

"Me too." Raph admitted, very quietly. "I think you're the only one left who's never been scared 'a me."

He would always have that, at least. Leo couldn't be afraid of him, because he understood him too well. Oh, they each pretended otherwise, of course – snapped at each other like mortal enemies, argued over the tiniest of things – but in the end they were just too similar. It was this, more than anything else, that convinced Raph that Leo might have a point. Raph trusted Leo; he always had, even if he'd denied it to everyone else and even to himself. And if Leo could believe in him, then maybe Raph would just have to trust Leo's judgement and start trying to believe in *himself* for a change.

The realisation came as something like a surrender, but one that left him feeling relieved, instead of weak. He felt something ease inside of him, as if a complicated knot had just been loosened, and perhaps now with some patient work it could be untied completely. Maybe, just maybe, he could finally start to let this go.

It was subtle, but Raph could feel Leo's shoulder press more firmly against his, a comforting weight. They didn't need to talk any more, then. There were some things, after all, that needed no words.

Reclamation

A/n: Well guys, it's been fun! Yup, this is the last chapter of *Send in the Clowns* . I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it, because I had a total blast.

To everyone who has reviewed, I can't thank you enough. You guys have praised me and pushed me (in a good way!). Just the knowledge that something I have written can reach out and speak to people is incredibly rewarding, and such a huge motivator.

To whoever nominated me in the fanfic comp – thankyou so much, you made my day! :D

And to the TMNT world in general - thanks for being the best fandom ever!

Epilogue – Reclamation

"Hey Raph, c'mere. I want to show you something."

Raphael poked his head around the corner of Don's computer nook, and his brother motioned for him to come closer. "I think you'll want to read this," he said, standing and offering Raph his seat in front of the screen.

Don moved away, giving him some space as Raph sat down and began to read. He started aimlessly tinkering with some wiring on one of his spare computer towers, in an effort to reassure his brother that he wasn't being watched. It had always made Raph uncomfortable, to have someone watching him while he read – a throwback to their old schooling days, perhaps.

Don had found the article in a quick browse of the major news websites that morning. As he'd expected, it wasn't exactly headline news. Just a short piece reporting that the previous morning, police had received an anonymous tip-off and busted an illegal animal ring, arresting the owner and several other men and women involved in its activities. The authorities had confiscated the animals and contacted the relevant wildlife organisations, who would re-release the creatures back into the wild as soon as they were in a stable condition. The ringleader of the underground business was facing multiple charges and a jail sentence of at least several years.

Mulling over this information in his mind, Donatello glanced at Raph every now and then as he read, and watched as his posture slowly stiffened and he sat up straighter in the chair. When he reached the end of the article, he leaned back and expelled a deep breath.

"Good," he snarled, with an intense flash of anger. "Let *him* see what it feels like…"

The sentence didn't sound finished, but it seemed to fall away from him along with the last traces of vindictiveness, and without saying another word he rose and walked from the room almost calmly, with a sense of purpose in his movements that had been absent for a long time.

Don let him go. He thought that he could fill in the blanks.

*Let **him** see what it feels like to live inside a cage.*

He was suddenly, fiercely glad that they'd left Darmonaz to this fate.

He ran with anger, at first. Pounding the pavement, trying to channel the pain that he'd been forced to feel into the unyielding concrete, pumping his fury out with his muscles. Christ, it felt good to *move* . He didn't think he'd ever run this fast before. The wind tore at his throat as he breathed.

He ran as an animal must run – on instinct, pushing for nothing but speed – and he didn't care. There was nothing *wrong* with his animal side. It was his damn human side, the part that got bitter and jealous and lonely, that he had to watch out for. One day, he mused, (and perhaps he was catching a glimpse of the future, here), human and animal would be balanced in him. For now, he ran.

He couldn't pinpoint exactly when it happened. But there was a moment when he realised that he was no longer running in anger. He was reclaiming the rooftops, his turf, his concrete jungle. All of this belonged to him, and he belonged to it. No freak with a taser and some needles was gonna convince him otherwise. He wouldn't let himself be defined by something that had been done to him.

Was it freedom *from* himself, or just the freedom to *be* himself? Raphael could not answer, and thought that it did not matter much either way. It was *freedom* .

This unexpected elation would not be permanent, of course. Nothing was permanent. There would still be nightmares and there would still be mistakes, moments where his anger would get the better of him and he would lash out in ways that he didn't mean, hurt people he didn't want to hurt. But he was taking ownership of that now, and he trusted his brothers to help him. Now all he had to work on was accepting their help, but he could do that, in time. Right now he felt that he could do anything, in time. Right now, with the night air rushing past, he was invincible.

Somewhere on the Ganges River, India.

It is dusk, and the rumble of the truck engine has finally stilled. The tiger with amber eyes steps cautiously from its container, hearing and disregarding the babble of human voices coming from nearby. They are not close enough to threaten, and the tiger can smell rain and damp earth and all the aromas of the forest. It has not forgotten the scent of home.

It takes a few more steps, coming out of its enclosure completely. The human voices subside into an expectant silence. The tiger raises its nose and sniffs at the air, a soft, contented growl rumbling in the back of its throat.

It stands poised for a second, as if waiting.

And then it runs.

The dark shape of it flows across the land, and soon it melts away and is lost in the greater darkness of the jungle and the deepening night.

.

The End.